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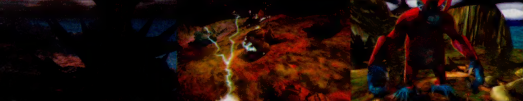


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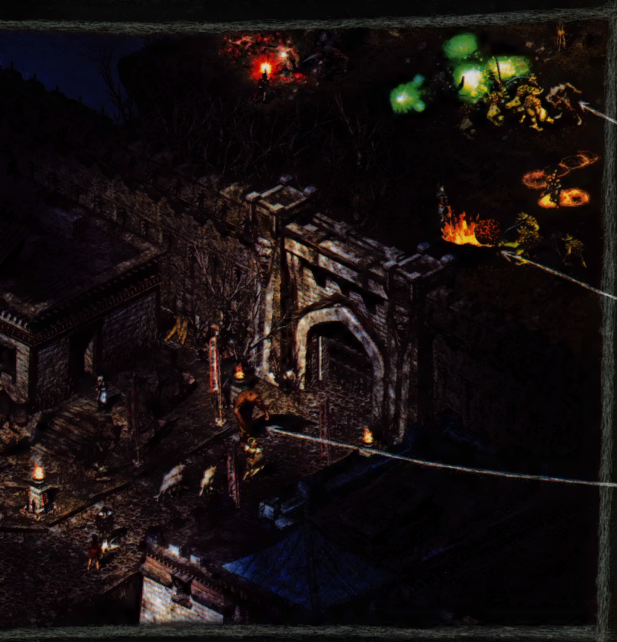
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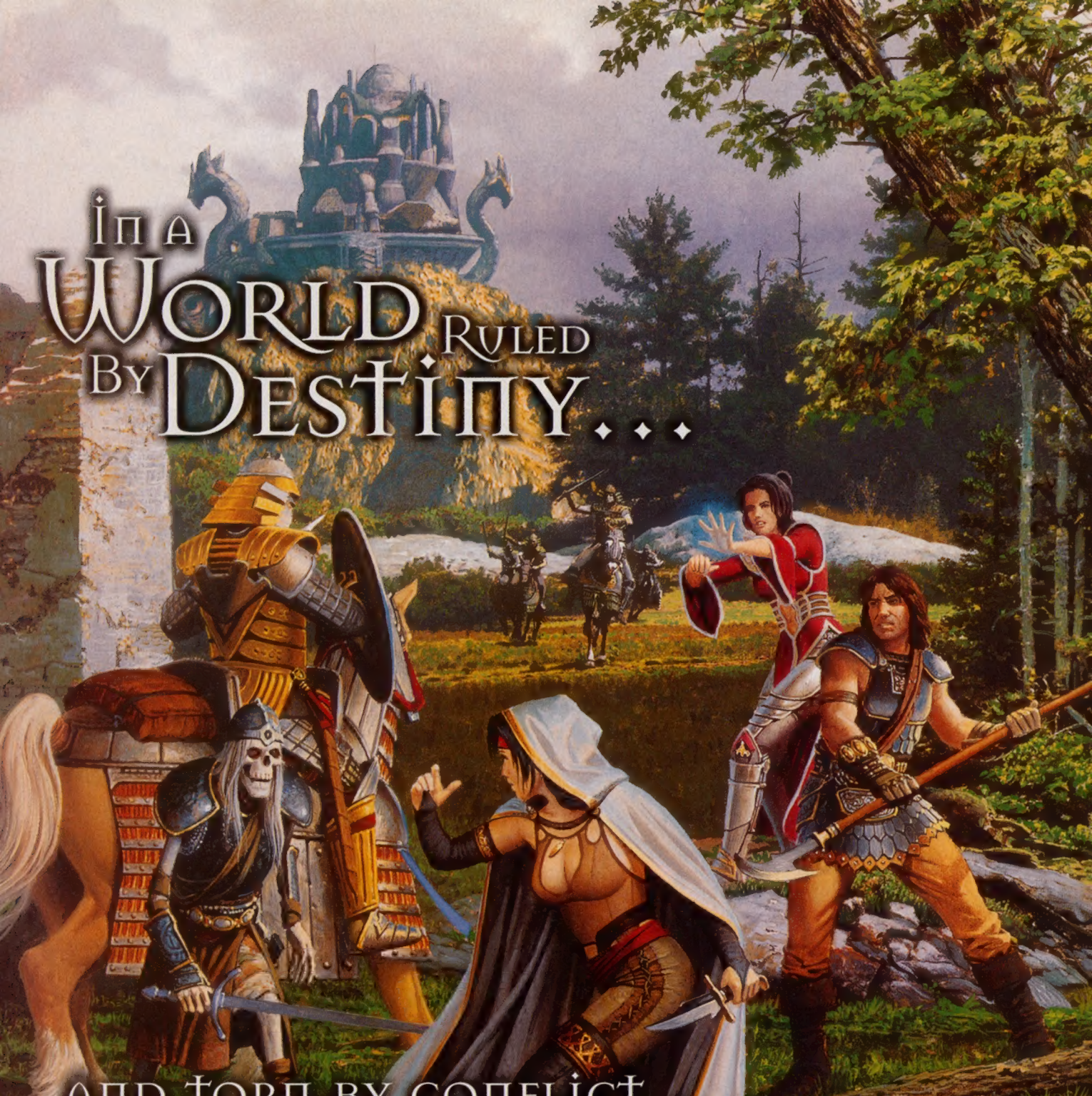


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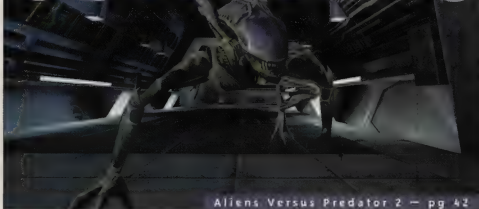
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Still More Violence

The issue that won't go away
by Steve Bauman



Oh dear, another column about violence. I know I'm sort of flogging a metaphorical dead horse here, and in keeping with the topic, I'm doing it graphically, with as much polygonal blood spillage as possible. I made a small but significant error in last month's Upfront column, one that warrants revisiting this topic yet another time.

In my editorial "Hazardous to Your Health," I said, "Surgeon General David Satcher issued a report tying violent TV shows and videogames to more aggressive behavior in children." What I should have said is "The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Surgeon General will tie violent TV shows and videogames to more aggressive behavior in children." I may have self-edited the story assuming the accuracy of the reporting of the *Times*, which got its information from what they claimed was a leaked draft of the report. This version apparently *Times* asserted that violent media (from movies to videogames) has an "important causal role" in violent crime. The *Times* further said that in issuing this report, "Satcher is turning what has been a legal debate into a public-health issue, associating the effects of media violence with those of cigarette smoking."

The only problem with the story is that the *Times*'s information conflicted with the information contained in the actual report. Satcher's report, which was commissioned by then President Bill Clinton in the wake of the shootings at Columbine, does an impressive job of exploding many of the myths that surfaced after that tragic event. A careful reading shows that it significantly downplays the role the media plays in aggressive behavior in youths, pointing the finger primarily at home life, poverty and peer pressure. "It was extremely difficult to distinguish between the relatively small long-term effects of exposure to media violence and those of other influences," the report says, noting that violent crime amongst youths has actually been on the decrease since 1993, mostly due to a decline in the use of firearms. This is in stark

contrast to many post-Columbine doomsayers, who effectively claimed that exposure to violent media was creating armies of violent super predator children.

"Many anecdotal reports have described instances in which television and film violence led to immediate violent behavior in individual children," the report goes on to say, "but scientific studies of this relationship draw a more complex and qualified picture." It notes that most studies are narrowly focused on testing specific causal hypotheses and do not examine the effects of all factors that might be present in more realistic situations.

Violent videogames, however, weren't entirely left off the hook. "Children are theoretically more susceptible to behavioral influences when they are active participants than when they are observers," the report

*...violence is usually
the only solution to
a problem...*

notes, though it stops short of drawing any causal relationship, in large part because there isn't a significant body of research. There have been a few reports examining violent games and physical aggression that show "small" correlations with physical aggression and "moderate" links to aggressive thinking, but overall the connection "remains to be determined."

It's not particularly surprising to find violent videogames leading to increased aggression; you'd probably get the same result from studying kids playing basketball or from any other form of vigorous activity.

Other research notes that factors that appear to influence the effects of media violence on aggressive or violent behavior

include characteristics of the viewer (such as age, intelligence, aggressiveness, and whether the child perceives the media as realistic and identifies with aggressive characters) and his or her social environment (for example, parental influences), as well as aspects of media content (including characteristics of perpetrators, degree of realism and justification for violence, and depiction of consequences of violence). All of these are important when applied to games—games are getting more realistic, character designs are getting stronger (allowing players to better identify with the protagonists), and there have been few attempts to show reasonable justification or consequence of violent acts (violence is usually the only solution to a problem).

You probably didn't hear much about Satcher's report, which could have had to do with its timing (right around the inauguration of President George W. Bush) or other more newsworthy stories. However, had it shown a clear "important causal role" in violent crime (as the *Times* reported in their preview) there's little question the major news media would have been all over the topic, and groups throughout the country from all across the political spectrum would have been calling for more government control of violent content.

The mainstream media has failed to present anything resembling balanced reporting on this topic, which makes you wonder if the general public accepts the causal relationship between violent media and violent behavior that Satcher's report failed to find. Regardless of the public's perception, the amount of dialogue on the issue has ultimately been a good thing, forcing the entertainment industry to do a bit of soul-searching and potentially change some of their more questionable ways, particularly when it comes to marketing violent material to the minors for whom they claim it's inappropriate. Whether or not it's actually inappropriate at all is certainly a valid question, but that's still one best answered by parents and not government agencies. ■

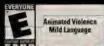
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(left) Visual touches abound, such as day and night cycles and loads of ambient animations such as wheat fields that sway and bend in the breeze.

(top right) Paris gets sacked...
The guns of Navarone...
Empire Earth-style.

The Secret Weapons

Stainless Steel Studios turns to top gamers to find the balance for Empire Earth

IS THERE ENOUGH ROOM IN THE WORLD FOR ANOTHER *AGE OF Empires II*? All developers aiming to enter the historical real-time strategy arena—and there are more than a few—need to ask themselves that question. Rick Goodman has spent a lot of time thinking about how his own vision of historical real-time strategy compares to the one created by Ensemble Studios; he was the lead designer on the original *Age of Empires*, and the co-founder of the company. After that title was published he left Ensemble to found Stainless Steel Studios in his hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts. There he began work on *Empire Earth*, a game that at first glance seems to have a lot in common with his earlier work.

slightly unorthodox with the game's development, turning to the *Age of Empires* community for help.

Stainless' secret weapon

There are plenty of game development companies that do focus testing and get the opinions of select gamers to help make sure they're on the right track. However, Stainless has taken an extra step and literally hired players and designers straight from the community to work out of its offices in Cambridge, its own virtual "Strike Team." Its *raison d'être* is twofold: to balance the game for competitive multiplayer play, and to develop great single-player scenarios.

Stainless Steel waited until it had nailed down most of the game's core technology before hiring the Team. Assistant designer Richard Bishop, the person in charge of game balance, got most of his resources from the hardcore real-time strategy community. "The pool of online gamers is just so vast that people from our industry cannot hope to compete," he says. "It's like asking why the various 'Dream Team' incarnations overwhelm other basketball teams during the Olympics. These people have been playing against world-class competition for years. They are simply the best of the best." It's certainly an argument that makes sense. If you're going to make a game that's balanced enough for competitive multiplayer play on a professional level, you hire profes-



"Ready, aim, fire!"

It seems to have a lot in common with his earlier work at second glance, too, but you also begin to see a lot of subtle differences, particularly in scope and detail. Instead of serving up an *Age of Empires*-sized slice of human history, *Empire Earth* offers an entire 500,000-year banquet of human evolution in twelve epoch courses, from Prehistory to a speculative near future filled with nano-technology and giant battle robots. And he's doing something



Will the game be better because of the guys Stainless hired from the community?

signals to balance it.

Finding gamers who were qualified wasn't much of a challenge. Take the players with big tournament victories and high ladder rankings for the biggest real-time strategy games and you've got a list of about 100 players who are all far better at finding and exploiting game imbalances than your typical mortal game developer. Narrowing it down from there was a bit more difficult. The ability to concisely and effectively explain exactly why something is imbalanced is crucial, so choosing people from that list of 100 or so with that ability, as well as the desire to relocate to the Boston area, resulted in a pretty short list.

Get the balance

The balancing team is composed of quite a few pros that you may have heard of, if you follow those circles. There's Damon Gauthier, or "Stratus," the *StarCraft* player that was ranked very high in the PGL and placed fourth at the Brood War Championship Tournament. You'll also find Mike Echino (aka "YoungGunz"), an *Age of Empires* and *Age of Kings* player who has maintained a top-50 ranking in both games. Another *Age of Kings* player is Nate "REDLINE" Jacques, who worked in a sheet metal shop every day and then played until 2:00AM. Sunny "Crexis" Sihota competes in both *StarCraft* and *Age of Kings* tournaments, and has taken a good chunk of the prize money at several of them.

These hardcore players are remarkably like-minded about making a great game. When asked about balancing for hardcore vs. casual players, everyone expresses the same commitment to pleasing both parties.

"You must make it simple enough so the casual gamer can get into it easily," explains Sihota, "yet provide enough strategy to keep the expert players interested for years."

"A real-time strategy game is properly balanced when players need to think ahead and have multiple options for victory," says Gauthier. "A dominant strategy should definitely not exist. All units need to serve a purpose and have appropriate counters." The rest of the players at Stainless Steel would echo this. They also completely agree on their desire to stay on and work with the company once *Empire Earth* is completed, if it's at all possible.

The long and the short of it

There's still plenty of work to be done on this complex game, and not all the new blood is there for game balancing. The community is overflowing with quality user-made maps and scenarios, many of which rival the best that ship with the games. Chris Theriault was one of the hobbyists making quality maps since the early days of *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*. One of his



Massive clouds of smoke drift across the battlefield in Napoleonic battles.

briefs

New DOOM debuts—Leave it to Steve Jobs and Apple to get the gaming world excited even though their Macintosh platform is a distant second to the PC in gaming. At MacWorld Tokyo in February, Jobs invited id Software master programmer John Carmack to the stage during Jobs' keynote speech, to demonstrate for the first time publicly the new engine Carmack is creating for id's new DOOM game. Running on Mac OS X and the brand new GeForce 3 video chip from NVIDIA, Carmack's short but sweet demo showed the dark inside of a sci-fi level with lots of cool and moody lighting effects. The 3D characters looked detailed and frightening as well. Yes, this is just a tech demo. Yes, it's likely that all of the stuff shown in the video



Doom

will be completely changed around by the time the full DOOM game is released (which won't happen for quite a while). Still, you can almost hear the hum of long time DOOM fans muttering "Must... have... game... now." Carmack seems quite enamored with the GeForce 3, praising it as a major architectural change and dubbing it "fantastic." "I haven't had such an impression of raising the performance bar since the Voodoo 2 came out, and there are a ton of new features for programmers to play with." However, he did offer one caveat—he's not sure if he can recommend it to consumers... yet. "There aren't any applications out right now that take proper advantage of it, but you should still be quite a bit faster at everything than GeForce 2, especially with anti-aliasing. Balance that against whatever the price turns out to be." In other entirely unrelated id news, Activision is bringing an all-new version of id's classic side-scrolling Commander Keen game to the Game Boy Advance... *Jedi Knight 2*?—A French gaming web site caused a stir when they posted Activision's upcoming European release schedule. On this list for PC games was none other than *Jedi Knight 2*. Since Activision distributes and publishes LucasArts's games in France and other parts of Europe, this could be a sign >>>

briefs

that LucasArts wants to get back some of its lost reputation for making cool *Star Wars* games. Officially, LucasArts isn't saying anything, but you can expect more info soon. On another front, LucasArts has recruited no less than Ensemble Studios to help them create some new *Star Wars* real-time strategy games, with the first debuting in the fall of this year. The game, called *Star Wars Battlefront*, is being developed in-house at LucasArts with consultation from Bruce Shelley and the gang at Ensemble, who will primarily work on play balancing the game. The game will utilize a 2D engine much like the one in Ensemble's *Age of Empires* games. The game will span all four films (shades of *Age of Empires*) and feature familiar units (specific will likely come in upcoming months). This is the first of a planned series of

Age of Empires campaigns about the pre-history of Korea—created for an expansion pack that was never released—caught the eye of the folks at Stainless Steel and was brought aboard to help with the solo game.

Empire Earth offers twelve historical epochs (or "ages," if you prefer) to choose from—the Prehistoric, Stone, Copper, Bronze, Dark, Middle, Renaissance, Imperial, Industrial, Atomic, Information, and Nano ages. If you're not sure that you want *Civilization* scope in a real-time strategy game, don't worry—you can pick and choose which epochs you play in and tailor your game to cover as much (or as little) of history as you care to see.

"We're trying to say there's people who want a short game, and there's people who want a long, *Civilization*-style game," says Goodman. "Let's try to embrace both markets, because they're both important. We want to appeal to people who like science fiction and don't want a historical game, and to the people who like history and don't want science fiction, and to people who like ancient history and don't want the 20th century. You can pick your epochs and play what you prefer."

Ease it in

Dividing the game into twelve discreet bits allows new players to ease into the experience. If you play the game chronologically (that's how the solo campaigns are presented), the complexity ramps up with each successive epoch. There are over one hundred different playable units in the game, but in the earliest epoch your combined arms military force will consist of only two—stone throwers and clubmen.

You also have citizens, the games working class and ostensibly one of your most important resources. Citizens perform all the typical routine chores that drive your real-time empire—building structures, farming, hunting. They also help your civilization grow; take a bunch of citizens and garrison them in your settlement structure, and it upgrades to a town center. Garrison the town center and it turns into a capitol.

"Now you have things to do with your citizens," says Goodman, "because it takes 30 or 40 citizens to get to that level, and now those buildings can enhance your morale, and they can enhance your economics. In many games, when you reach your population cap you go on a conquering spree. In this game you have more options in city building, and you can invest more in building your town."



Naval units receive a combat bonus when they are close to a friendly dock; launching a sea invasion can be a tricky endeavor.



A few well-placed trebuchets make for wonderful back-up.

If you build it...

Goodman hopes that presenting citizens as an ad hoc resource will also give you an incentive to continue producing them throughout the game. You won't merely crank out 20 or 30 of the little workers right out of the gate and leave it at that, particularly if you want to focus on building your empire. That's one area in which Goodman clearly believes other real-time games fall a bit short; *Empire Earth* is taking a few cues from classic turn-based games (i.e. *Civilization*) in that regard. "We're saying hey, if you're an empire builder and you like a long build-up game, there's a whole new level of build-up that you can invest in, and it will pay off. The conqueror may not want to do it, and that's okay—we're not taking anything away from them. A lot of the buildings also have area effects, so placing your structures just right will have a benefit that the conqueror may not be concerned about."

Like *Age of Empires*, the game will offer a pacifistic route to victory in the form of Wonders of the World. There are six different Wonders that you can build; completing construction on any one of them triggers a "victory time clock," provided that you have Wonder victories enabled.

More detailed empire building potentially means more complexity, and that's one thing that Goodman wants to avoid—particularly given the fact that you play the game in real-time. The development team has spent a lot of time looking for ways to streamline the interface, and they have reinvented a few wheels that should keep the game moving along smoothly. You can add buildings to hot-key groups, for instance, which allows you to select and manage the various structures that make up your empire remotely. Need to build a few extra units to help you out in a battle? You can queue them up without diverting your attention away from the battlefield.

All things to all people?

"The single-player and the multiplayer experience are for very different audiences," explains Goodman. "There's overlap, sure, but what you want to get out of a single-player experience is really different than what you get out of a fast-clicking multiplayer experience."

With so many team members brought from a multiplayer-centric community, the challenge will be for Goodman and company to get the balance right. Will putting "professionals" in the driver's seat result not only in a better multiplayer game but also a successful and approachable solo game for the slightly less hardcore? When *Empire Earth* ships this summer, we'll find out if it'll be quick history, or if it'll be one for the Ages.

—Jason Cross/Benjamin E. Sones

Dreamland Chronicles

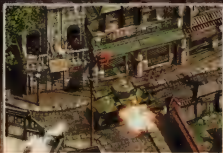
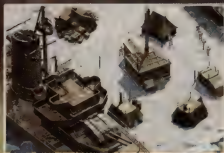
games from LucasArts and Ensemble, with other games using new technologies designed to "weave increasingly innovative engineering into the core premise of interactive strategic warfare within the *Star Wars* universe" (whatever that means). "All of it at us at Ensemble are huge *Star Wars* fans and we're very pleased to be partners with LucasArts in creation of *Star Wars Battlefront*," says Ensemble Studios CEO Tony Goodman in a prepared statement. "The passion and talent of the LucasArts team blends well with our Real Time Strategy game expertise to make the *Star Wars* universe a compelling and fun game experience." One question remains: Will LucasArts also become more flexible with releasing new content (maps, units, etc) on the net after the game is released? They are one of the few publishers that don't believe in the "free stuff" doctrine that other publishers and developers subscribe to (including Ensemble)... *Dreamland sleeps with fishes*—UK developer Mythos Games announced that *Dreamland Chronicles: Freedom Ridge*—one of last month's "Games (We Think) We Want to Play" in 2001—has been cancelled due to the pull-out of their publisher Virgin Interactive. The game, created by the developers of the original *X-COM* title, promised to bring >>>

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Actual
In-Game
Screenshot of
Draconis IV



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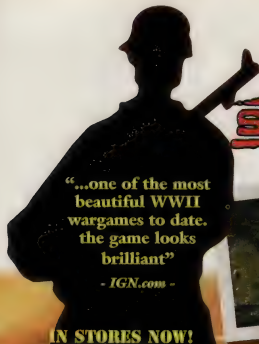
COMING 2001



EMPEROR

BATTLE FOR DUNE

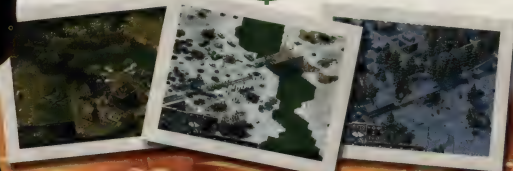
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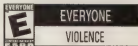
- Featuring the artwork of famed Napoleonic artist Keith Rocco
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- Design your own "random" battles



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briefs

that same type of cool tactical strategy to a 3D world. Mythos' Julian Gollop announced, in the Mythos Games forum, that they'd been looking for another publisher, but no agreement had been reached and they ran out of cash. Blame it on the PlayStation 2—development stalled when they tried to adapt the game for that platform in order to make it more attractive to their publisher... **Shiny takes the blue pill**—Or is it the red pill? One of the worst kept secrets in gaming was finally revealed in February as Interplay announced it had received the rights from Warner Brothers to create video and PC games based on the hit sci-fi film *The Matrix* and its two upcoming sequels. Shiny Entertainment is known to be working



The Matrix

on at least one *Matrix* game for both PC and game consoles, utilizing the technology from *Messiah* (before you send those nasty e-mails, remember it also powered the far superior *Sacrifice*). While getting *The Matrix* license is certainly a big deal, games based on films have often proved disappointing. While Shiny is certainly a capable development team, it remains to be seen if *The Matrix* can be as memorable a game as it was a movie. Don't expect a lot of news on the title for a while; to paraphrase Morpheus, "No one can be told what the game is. You will have to see it for yourself."...

I am the law—UK developer Rebellion revealed that they will be using properties from their recently acquired 2000 A.D. comic book for games, with the first being a *Judge Dredd* first person shooter using an all new game engine. These are the folks who made the very successful *Aliens Versus Predator* game so there is every reason to believe that a *Judge Dredd* game from these folks will be worth looking into, despite some of the baggage this character has (Insert your own Sylvester Stallone-Rob Schneider jokes here).... **Peta Wilson 3D**—Infogrames announced in February an upcoming game for both PC and consoles based on the cancelled *La Femme Nikita* TV series, giv- >>>

first looks

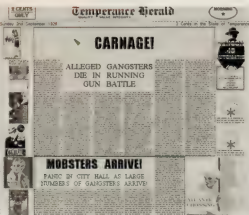
A Bullet to the Head

Gangsters 2 attempts to redeem its forefathers

IN THE LATTER PART OF 1998, DEVELOPER HOTHOUSE Creations let loose upon the world their somewhat convoluted but potentially promising strategy game, *Gangsters*. For the most part, it proved an offer many gamers felt just too ready to refuse, due to its lack of consistency, unwieldy interface, micromanagement requirements, and high degree of difficulty.

Well, they're at it again. *Gangsters 2: Vendetta*, due to be published by Eidos this Summer, is set in the fictional state of New Temperance during prohibition. You are Joey Bane, a gangsterling (that's a fledgling gangster) who is attempting avenge your father's murder without the assistance of the WCTU. You use your skills to build a team of mobsters including specialists such as Card-Sharps, Hit-Men, Arsonists, and Safe-Crackers in the attempt to dominate at least 18 major cities throughout 20 or more scenarios. You may command your trusted Lieutenants to act as hit men, bribe officials, or ambush enemy gangs. You can build a crime ring that will help fund your organization, and we're not talking bake sale, here. Successful planning will provide moolah, a big shiny car, and enough heat to strong-arm the state government.

The developers have completely revamped the game's real-time engine, adding among other things cyclic day and night that will play an important role



The daily news holds the key to some of your best strategies.

in your strategic planning. Run "watch job" shops by day and brothels by night (when there are fewer police on the street). One of the most valuable features is a daily newspaper to keep you informed about the status of your criminal empire, as well as to offer additional stats about the state of the game-world. It is color coded by gang, so that you'll be able to easily look up who's been arrested, which

contract killers are up for hire, which members of your own gang are on the FBI Most Wanted List, and many other useful bits of info. All of these tidbits will be helpful in making decisions about how to build your team for the next mission.

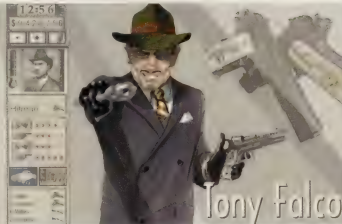
The game's characters have specific skills that are pertinent to different situations. A good driver may be a poor shooter, for instance. You may also affect the value of the characters by how you use them. If you leave one out on guard for days without rest, he may become testy and betray you to your enemies. On the other hand, if you keep them happy, they may offer more value and productivity.

While there is plenty going on, Hothouse is doing its level best to minimize the micromanagement of resources that was prevalent in *Gangsters*. There will be a briefing prior to each mission as part of what they're calling an "in-game advice" feature. You can choose to take or ignore the advice, but for newer players, it at least will offer some hint on how to approach the various challenges.

With any luck, *Gangsters 2* will be the "Vendetta" it is designed to be. —Cindy Yans



A much simpler interface



Tony Falco—Hit-man

The Prince of Brutality

Merchant Prince II returns with a little poison in it

"HENCE IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT IN TAKING HOLD OF A state, he who seizes it should examine all the offenses necessary for him to commit, and do them all at a stroke...for injuries must be done all together, so that, being tasted less, they offend less..." Thus spake Machiavelli. In other words, hit 'em brutally with everything you've got.

Machiavelli the Prince was a 1995 game from MicroProse originally released by QQP as *Merchant Prince*. Now Take-Two Interactive and Holistic Design (*Fading Suns*) are revisiting the world of the conniving power monger in *Merchant Prince II*. Set in the Renaissance, it will be a turn-based strategy game of economic, political, and military conquest very similar to its predecessor. It will offer five campaigns in Europe and Asia, as well as the New World. You'll explore various cultures across the globe in both historical and fantasy settings, and will be heavily based upon the world of Machiavellian politics, where "fair play" is never an issue. You'll be able to hire mercenaries, break open closed markets, threaten senators, torture hamsters, or raid your opponents' caravans.

The game will have optional setting allowing you to research and develop over 30 technologies including civic sanitation, cult followings, and plague control—rather, lack thereof. You can also choose slander as a weapon, with more than 100 different vicious



Italy's great centers of culture.

phrases at your fingertips, or you can create your own poison pen threats.

The developers believe that their economic engine is extremely robust, and although, at this time, the game's appearance is very retro compared to what else is out there, the large options offering will provide a very motivating strategic challenge. With multiplayer support for up to four players via LAN or over the Internet, *Merchant Prince II* will place you solidly in bribe-and-poison mode when it's released this summer. —Cindy Yans

briefs

ing hope to some that new games based on *Pacific Blue* will be due out soon.... What about *Giant Robot*?—Headfirst Productions has signed on to create a PC game based on *Battle of the Planets*, a Japanese anime TV show that gained fame in America long before *Pokémon*. First *The Dukes of Hazzard* gets a game and now this. Actually, we are waiting breathlessly for that *Starsky and Hutch* game that Empire announced nearly a year ago. Getting to interact with Huggy Bear in a fully 3D world is something that we have been dreaming about for years... Oni gets WAPped—Take Two wasted no time in announcing a prequel in February to their third person action game *Oni*. This time, however, it won't appear on the PC, Playstation 2 or the Mac, but rather for WAP Internet



The World Is Not Enough

enabled cell-phones. What's next? *Online Quake* fragging on your Palm Pilot? Hmm... Not enough world for *The World Is Not Enough*—Finally, it looks like a super-spy is needed to find info on the PC game version of *The World Is Not Enough*. The PR reps at Electronic Arts are staying mum on the status of this *Quake III*-engine powered first person shooter based on the latest James Bond film. It's looking more and more like EA, and not Goldfinger, is expecting Mr. Bond to die. Hopefully, someone will shut off the laser beam before it's too late....Westwood goes to Earth and Beyond—Details are beginning to leak out about Westwood Studios' upcoming massively multiplayer sci-fi game *Earth and Beyond*. From the looks of things, this game is actually trying to break some new ground in the rather crowded field that this genre inspires. One detail that might be of interest: there might be a way to role-play a reporter in the game covering the major events in the world. If that happens, there might be a sudden shortage of PC game journalists once the game releases.... 3DO cuts back—More layoffs were ordered at 3DO last month, which is dealing with financial problems of its own. The company also said it would not be exhibiting at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in May, although they might show off some of their upcoming >>>

Out from the Night

Disciples II: Dark Prophecy promises a bright future for Disciples fans

WHEN THE TURN-BASED FANTASY STRATEGY GAME *Disciples: Sacred Lands* came out in 1999, it was something of a surprise hit. Its sequel, *Disciples II: Dark Prophecy* picks up where the previous game left off. You must lead your troops to victory through seven sagas and 20 quests, some of which are interdependent and some of which may not even be available until after you've performed certain actions or eliminated specific enemies.

While *Disciples* has a respectable array of different creatures and characters, the sequel boasts a fully 50% higher critter count. With so many additional units, you will now be able to recruit some of the for-

merly fixed-neutral units as your allies. They will join your army, but will still remain distinct. All units also benefit from the new open-ended level structure. Rather than being stuck at the top of an advancement tree, units can still accumulate experience, gain levels, and improve their abilities, even when upgrades are no longer possible.

Disciples II has more new attack modes (such as shapechange) than are in the original's complete collection. Players of the first game will be pleased to hear that leaders can now use some magic items during tactical combats, which are themselves much enhanced by a new perspective and interface improvements. So you've played through the sagas and have an awesome 15th level leader that has nothing left to do? Export him to a saved file for future reference.

Although less visible, an even more significant improvement places customization at your fingertips. The game includes a powerful, multiplayer scripting feature allowing you to choose more than a dozen different triggers to change many in-game flags such as victory conditions or even creature loyalty. This scripting already makes the scenarios (called quests) profoundly more interesting than in *Disciples*.

All of the improvements, both visually and "behind the scenes," should make *Disciples II: Dark Prophecy* a reasonable return to the Empire, the Mountain Clans, the Legions of the Damned, and the Undead Hordes, as they continue the battle for the destiny of their gods when the game is released in May. —Steve Lieb



Interior of the Undead Hordes Capital City with a few upgrade structures.

games at a site other than the L.A. Convention Center. Hey, it worked for Gathering of Developers with their parking lot showing of games and babes. Just imagine a scantily clad *Army Men* model right now.... **More buyouts**—More consolidation ensued in the industry in February as Ubisoft bought out Blue Byte Software. With *The Settlers* series of games under the Ubisoft label now, maybe they can finally get these games in North American stores (currently, U.S. residents may only buy the games through Blue Byte's web site).... **Hired Guns looking for work**—After months and months of silence, VR-1 has finally revealed that their *Unreal* engine powered first person shooter *Hired Guns* has a snowball's chance in hell



Hired Guns

of ever being put in stores. The reason? Psygnosis, the game's owner, got out of the publishing business in the U.S. and won't let VR-1 take the game to other publishers... **Muppets get moonstruck**—Producer Simon & Schuster Interactive and developer Red Lemon Studios (*Braveheart*) acquired the *Farscape* license, and will craft an action-adventure game that we can't even begin to expect before early 2002. Currently airing internationally, including a stint on the Sci-Fi Channel, the series' present day setting renders it somewhat different from other sci-fi shows. It involves a 20th century astronaut whose tussle with a wormhole causes him to be tossed across the universe where he gate-crashes an alien conflict. The hero, John Crichton, lands on a living animatronic ship named *Moya*, and joins a bunch of alien refugees in their battle against the Peacekeepers. In the game, you'll be able to choose to be Crichton, or one of the aliens: the outcast Peacekeeper Aeryn, the street-smart Chiana, the brutish warrior D'Argo, the royal sovereign Rygel or the high priestess Zhaan. Whichever you choose, you will be stranded on a remote planet, caught between warring native factions and the deadly Peacekeepers. Your mission? Uncover the threat to galactic stability and crush it like a bug. In a third-person environment, you'll control characters with >>>

Mud and Beer

Off-Road Redneck Racing brings the trailer park to racing

BURP. YEEEE HAAAA! "I'M GIVING YOU EXACTLY ONE minute to find a clean dress and get your ass in it," er, "li'l kettle-bottom." There. Now that the mood is set, you can open that trailer window and keep the good eye focused on the debut of Interplay's *Off-Road Redneck Racing*.

Leonard, one of the foulest, smelliest, most disgusting creatures you've ever come to know and love, and his pal Bubba (both of whom you'll remember from playing *Redneck Rampage*) are standing



The lower left course map shows your progress.

solidly behind this off-road racing game with a down-home theme. You'll race across six environments across 24 different tracks, in any of 16 different types of vehicles. **Factory-ville in the midnight sky.** Each types offers three variations in style, which, if you (instead of Bubba) do the math, makes for 48 unique racing machines.

You begin as a division four driver, and as you increase in skill, you will earn invitations from other teams, sponsor upgrades, and promotion to a higher division, with your ultimate goal being victory at the Drivers Championship. You will race during daytime and nighttime, in various weather conditions, over many different terrains, for which the developers have been working on an accurate physics model.

Off-road Redneck Racing is scheduled for release in April. *Hic.* —Cindy Yans



Factory-ville in the midnight sky.

Running Men

Nexagon: The Pit takes a trip on the familiar side

WHERE HAVE YOU HEARD THIS before? It's thousands of years in our future, all criminals have been exiled to off world PODS for safekeeping, and someone has the bright idea to let these bands of deviants fight among themselves for the chance at freedom. On television. Oh my, did someone see *Running Man* once too often?

Despite the hackneyed plot, *Nexagon: The Pit* does have some interesting hooks. It's a 3D, real-time tactical game, with an emphasis on destructible terrain, unit experience, and the ability to buy and use power-ups to customize and protect your home base. You'll be able to place objects using the 3D view or a top-down view, which ever gives you the best angle.

During the game, you'll play through three different divisions in your penal colony league, before gaining the right to compete in *The Pit* for the ultimate prize, freedom from clichés... er, from the POD. Each division will have several contenders, and the leagues are persistent, with your status maintained and updated between matches. This sort of ranking



These alien frog people with big knives don't want you to be free.

will play a major role in multiplayer games, according to the game's publisher Strategy First.

Individual units will also gain experience as you go along, and you'll be able to improve your thralls by keeping them alive and by permanent upgrades you can purchase. Thralls do most of the fighting, and thus building up a strong, experienced army of them can only help you in your quest to kill Richard Dawson and win your parole. Coming to a prison near you sometime this fall. —Robert Mayer



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complementary attributes to solve a variety of inter-connected challenges.... *TalonSoft in the stars*—TalonSoft will publish *Star Leader* this fall. The plot brings to mind many stories and games, such as *Ender's Game*, *Aliens* and *Starship Troopers*, and *Space Hulk*, but the gameplay is unique in the sense it has characters that follow you through the game. These marines gather experience, skills, and, if you're lucky, bigger and louder toys to help them "kill bugs good." While you're on this journey to save mankind from the trouble it always seems to get itself into whenever venturing into the cosmos, make sure to take time to notice the scenery. Based on early screenshots, *Star Leader* presents an appealing virtual tour of the various fantastic landscapes science fiction authors and artists have dreamed up over the



Star Leader

years.... The new game "Where is Romero?"—Nearly a year after the critically panned first person shooter *Daikatana* hit stores, rumors are flying about the game's infamous creator John Romero and his status at Ion Storm—the development company he helped to found. "Is he in or is he out?" some people are asking. Maybe a better question would be, "Should we care or should we start another game of *Counter-Strike*?" ... *More wars for independence*—Developer Particle Systems is readying a sequel to their superb award-winning space simulation *Independence War*. *Edge of Chaos* is the name of the sequel, and it should be on store shelves as you read this. Having smartly listened to both fans and critics of the original, the latest installment of this budding series promises a more streamlined interface and less linear gameplay than the first. With the newly-designed Flux engine's tight Newtonian physics and absolutely stunning visuals to back it up, this could be the game that has everyone saying, "Freelancer who?" You fly missions, you blow stuff up, it's all good.... *COD sequels EVO*—Gathering of Developers and Terminal Reality announced the development of *4x4 EVO 2*, a sequel to the arcade-style off-road simulation *4x4 EVO*. *EVO 2* will have the same features, and add new, >>>

Children of the Bhaal

BioWare draws the *Baldur's Gate* saga to a close with *Throne of Bhaal*

ADDING MORE STUFF TO *BALDUR'S Gate II* is a bit like tossing a few bags of kitty litter into the back of your Ford Excursion to keep it weighed down on snowy roads—nice sentiment, but is it really necessary? BioWare seems to think so, as they're cooking up an expansion called *Throne of Bhaal* just in case that game's 200 hours of gameplay left you wanting for more.

"When we started *Baldur's Gate* back in '96, we always had in mind a trilogy for the core storyline—the 'child of Bhaal' story," explains producer Alan Miranda. "It's certainly not going to be the end of the *Baldur's Gate* series, but this will wrap things up for people who played *Baldur's Gate*, or who have played *Baldur's Gate II*—some or all of it."

The expansion comes in two parts—an add-on and an "add-in." The add-on picks up where the last game ended and concludes the child of Bhaal storyline once and for all. The "add-in" injects new content into *Baldur's Gate II*, mostly an excessively large dungeon called Watcher's Keep, described by the folks at BioWare as "the coolest dungeon we've ever made." There you'll encounter a variety of nasty monsters and a fairly large assortment of legendary artifacts from the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rules. You'll also probably die a lot.

The new story starts in your own personal stronghold in the Abyss. From there, you'll learn a variety of new (and extremely potent) powers, each of which opens up new areas of your stronghold to explore. You can also create or import a party of your own, if you prefer. The game will automatically bump any character you use to 2,000,000 experience points, and outfit you with items appropriate to that level.

Next you'll travel to a variety of places, including the city of Saradush (in Tethyr), which is under siege.



"Welcome to our... workshop"

It seems that the children of Bhaal are at war with each other, and you have landed right in the thick of it. The city is teeming with huddled refugees, hot-tempered locals, decaying corpses, and disease. Catapults rain fire down on the city streets as you walk around. It's not a happy place.

It does show off some of the advanced scripting that BioWare has worked into the game, however. City inhabitants don't necessarily just stand around waiting for you to talk to them—they walk to the store, walk home, go to the local tavern, and just generally follow their daily routine. Tempers flare, brawls break out, and life in the city goes on around you.

There are a number of new spells and abilities in the expansion as well, including a new character kit, the Wild Mage. Miranda describes some of the spells that you'll be able to cast as "Biblical" in style, similar to the Quest Spells introduced in the 2nd Edition *Tome of Magic*.

Excessive? Perhaps, but that term could apply to any new content heaped on top of the already lengthy game that is *Baldur's Gate II*. You have a bit of time to prepare, at least—*Throne of Bhaal* should hit stores sometime late this spring. —Benjamin E. Sones



It's either something dangerous, or a really big hair dryer... or both.



Somewhere in the game you'll find a Manual of Golems... very handy.

WHAT DOES NOT KILL YOU,
WILL MAKE YOU WISH IT HAD.

CLIVE BARKER'S
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Live the Horror. Or Die Trying.



FROM THE DIABOLICAL MIND OF CLIVE BARKER, COMES A HARROWING TALE OF SIBLING RIVALRY GONE TOO FAR - ALL THE WAY TO THE GRAVE. CONFRONT AND CONQUER YOUR WORST FEARS AS YOU UNRAVEL A DARK FAMILIAL CURSE AND PIT YOURSELF AGAINST THE SUPERNATURAL. DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK. BE AFRAID OF WHAT LURKS WITHIN IT.

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licensed vehicles (70 from 10 manufacturers), plus new single-player missions and tracks. The goal is to make the game more replayable than the original. Aquanox surfacing soon—Fishtank Interactive has announced it will publish Aquanox, Massive Development's sequel to the superb but unfortunately named *Archimedean Dynasty*. In a future world where the surface of Earth is uninhabitable, players take the role of submarine captain Emerald "Dead-Eye" Flint as he commands his sub through battles with sea monsters, storms, and rebel vessels. Fishtank plans to release the game in the Fall of 2001.... ■

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Price: \$40 • Rating ★★★★★

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Hasbro Interactive
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11. Half-Life: Game of the Year Edition—Sierra
12. Age of Empires II: The Conquerors—Microsoft
13. Combat Flight Simulator 2—Microsoft
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15. Baldur's Gate II—Interplay
16. Deer Hunter 4—Infogrames
17. Half-Life Counter-Strike—Sierra
18. EverQuest: Ruins of Kunark—Sony
19. Unreal Tournament Game of the Year Edition—Infogrames
20. American McGee's Alice—Electronic Arts

Source: PC Data, Boston, Virginia. Month of Jan. 2001

First looks

Squishy and Squirmy

Worms World Party gives you another reason to play with your worm



This used to be such a nice part of town before those worms came in and blew the place up.

IT TAKES A CERTAIN SORT OF GAMER TO ENJOY THE SHEER genius and nearly endless playability of a *Worms* game. The mix of saccharine cartoon character design with gleefully sadistic explosive action has made the various games in the series classics, and with good reason. Few games of any kind have anything close to its level of personality.

Now in its fourth iteration, *Worms World Party* enhances the series in fairly minor ways. It basically takes everything from the last three games, adds some interesting new modes and features, and just tries to tweak everything a little more. In other words, don't expect any ground-breaking innovation here, just more of that same tried and true action. That shouldn't prove to be a problem for fans of the series, however, since the refinements and additions appear as though they will be in the right places.

The main area where the latest edition shines is in the numerous gameplay modes available for both single- and multi-player. You'll see Time Attack rounds, a comprehensive array of training missions, multiplayer missions, deathmatch rounds with a horde of options, and even an expansive, mission-based single player campaign; unlike *Armageddon*, you won't have to complete the tutorial mode to access the more entertaining single-player missions.

Developer Team 17's most hyped new addition is the Wormpot. Essentially a Vegas-style slot machine of options, it will enable you to completely randomize the settings in a deathmatch game. According to the developer, the three reels of the Wormpot will spin (or you can manually select settings) allowing you to battle with a host of new effects, making for over a thousand possible combinations. Sticky or slippery surfaces, higher powered weapons and explosives, blood, and other options become unlocked in Wormpot mode. This allows you to really stretch your worm-battling skills under different, ever changing conditions.

If nothing else, the *Worms* games have always



This worm scores an eight for diving execution, although his form could use work.

offered variety, and *World Party* is the most expansive yet. In addition to the random-setting madness of the Wormpot mode, *Worms World Party* serves up 45 single player missions, 16 time attack rounds, 19 training levels, and 20 multiplayer missions—not to mention an endless array of random maps. In addition, you'll be able to create your own battleground with the in-game editor. Map settings include all the old favorites like Hell, bizarre urban cartoon locales, rocky cliffs, pastoral world settings, and plenty of other unique looking places.

Worms games have never gotten the exposure they deserved in this country, but hopefully now *Worms World Party* is released that will change. Fans are bound to appreciate the new game modes, and newcomers will find a game unlike virtually anything else out there. Just don't rush to the stores expecting a totally overhauled *Worms-in-a-box*. You won't get it, but you will get the last if not final iteration of one of the most endlessly entertaining and distinctive action-strategy games out there. —Jason D'Aprile

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This is not a good angle for a submarine commander to view an enemy bomber

Escort carriers like this one played a role in extended air support across the Atlantic, making life difficult for German U-boat commanders

MG 24 British merchant ship almost too far away

According to submarine commanders, there are two kinds of ships: submarines and targets.

Naval Contemplation

GAME Studios heads to the high seas with *Silent Hunter II* and *Destroyer Command*

GAME STUDIOS USED TO BE SSI, THE folks who brought us finer wargames, flight sims, and naval sims. But in the process of moving through various owners and names, their product line-up has tilted more and more towards a mainstream appeal. After all, as they're fighting to keep their heads above water, wargames and sims aren't exactly effective flotation devices. So it's hardly surprising that while Shawn Storc is demonstrating the multiplayer interaction between *Silent Hunter II* and *Destroyer Command*, the music for GAME Studios' sure-fire hit, *Myst III*, is blaring from a nearby cubicle where another press demo is being given.

Storc shoots the offending cubicle an annoyed look and continues explaining how these sims can be played at any number of levels. "If the player doesn't want to micromanage the game, they don't have to. They can get in and say, 'hey, I want to play it from the top down view and direct my forces as I see fit'. Or if you're one of the guys that likes to do this micromanaging, it's all in there. And it goes down to even encompass some screens

you really wouldn't think would be available, such as the engine room." He shows how he can turn off boilers or assign extra power to a particular screw.

Ultimation yields control

Storc is the producer for both titles, which are being developed by Ultimation, the creator's of 1998's *Panzer Commander*. *Silent Hunter II* and *Destroyer Command* will be released simultaneously this spring, as companion products with similar interfaces so players can easily move between them. Hot keys or tabs along the edge of the screen jump to the different stations of a German sub or an American destroyer.

For many of the stations he shows, Storc says that the AI will control this aspect of the game, but it's there if you want to use it yourself. This includes the engine controls, the damage control screens, the individual anti-aircraft guns, the main battery director in *Destroyer Command*, and even the gyroscopic settings for individual torpedoes in *Silent Hunter II*. SSI had a line of battleship sims, the *Great Naval Battles* series, with a similar approach. But the AI did so well that the player was superfluous in any role other than driver, so there was little reason to visit the different stations.

"The player definitely needs incentive to go into the stations," Storc admits. "In my view, the AI shouldn't be omnipotent. It shouldn't be way better than you. It should be just a little bit under your skill, because that way when you get into the station, it gives you the benefit. That's another part of what we could do with the realism settings." There's currently no option for setting the AI for individual

stations, but Storc says it's "something we've got on the table".

Silent stalker

Both games will allow for co-operative multiplayer games in which each player controls his own ship against computer-controlled opponents. You can even play head-to-head matches. This seems pointless in *Silent Hunter II* (there was no such thing as "intersubmarine" warfare in World War II), but deathmatches in *Destroyer Command* could be popular. "It's like you're in big durable airplanes with lots of different weapons," says executive producer Tim Goodlett. The most intriguing form of multiplayer is between the two separate games: someone with *Destroyer Command* can play against someone with *Silent Hunter II* in various multiplayer scenarios involving convoy escorts and submarine hunts.

Although this sounds like a great idea in theory, in practice, it could be tedious. Destroyers routinely spent hours hunting down a submarine after making contact. "It's a lot more stalking than shooting," says Goodlett. One of the keys to making it playable without drawing the suspense out into tedium is time compression. At this point, it looks as if the host will have sole control over time setting, but this could be problematic. "As the destroyer player, you're going to want more time to be able to hunt the submarine," Storc explains. "But as the submarine, you're going to want to get in and out as fast as possible." So how will they make sure it's fair? "It really has to do with us making sure the scenarios are tailored, for multiplayer at least, that they're close enough to get in to the action but yet not too close

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that everyone knows where the other players are immediately." Also, the submarine player will have to option to end the scenario once he moves a certain distance away from the destroyer.

Campaigns—scripted, not stirred

Although there's a quick mission generator, the rest of the game is pre-determined by scripted scenarios with some dynamic elements. The campaign, which consists entirely of scripted scenarios, will likely be disappointing to players who've enjoyed the dynamic campaigns in submarine sims like MicroProse's *Silent Service*, Dynamix's *Aces of the Deep*, and even the original *Silent Hunter*. Ultimatum's Mark Kundering says they would have preferred to include a dynamic campaign, but they didn't have the time or budget. "While it's very easy to make a crappy dynamic campaign, it's much more difficult to make a good one," he says, pointing out the virtues of scripted scenarios. "We have the ability to explore very specific historical scenarios. We can insure that each and every scenario is well balanced and has an appropriate difficulty level, as opposed to the mish-mash that randomly generated patrols could create. We can also explore a lot of interesting 'what-if' scenarios that would extend well beyond the capabilities of a computer-generated scenario."

"For instance," Kundering explains, "one scenario we have in *Silent Hunter II* involves two U-boats refueling with the tanker *Python* when the group is attacked by a British cruiser force. When I first looked at the scenario, I thought it seemed a bit strange. 'A U-boat being ambushed by a cruiser? Nonsense!' However, the *Python* really was attacked, along with several other tankers, in late 1941, shortly after the British had cracked the Kriegsmarine's Enigma codes. And the effects of this attack reverberated throughout the rest of the Battle of the Atlantic. U-boat commanders passed along the story



The "neon rigging" is an artifact that GAME Studios doesn't plan to include in the final product

to their peers, surface refueling operations were curtailed, and development was hurried on oil-ferrying U-boats, the 'Milk Cows.' So it turns out that this one attack was part of a pivotal moment in the war, and now we get to place the player in the middle of it."

Realistically speaking...

Silent Hunter II is played exclusively from the German side, in missions that range from the East Coast of the United States to the Mediterranean to the shores of South America.

Destroyer Command, however, also extends into the Pacific Theatre, where the player will go up against the Japanese in surface battles as well as anti-submarine duty.

Both games use the third generation of Ultimatum's Janus engine, which is also being used in *Harpoon*. The engine debuted to good effect in *Panzer Commander*, which featured detailed tank models and European countryside. Although the scale and terrain is much different in these naval sims, you'd never guess it was originally built for tank combat. The ocean waves swell and the models bob and roll convincingly in gentle weather.

"The weather in the North Atlantic can be quite ferocious," Storck says as he loads up a scenario in stormy weather, but it looks pretty tame considering the way the Atlantic raged in movies like *Das Boot* and *The Perfect Storm*. "We didn't quite model weather of that severity because it would just make the game unplayable. But as you can see, it's throwing the boat around quite a bit. You can imagine how difficult it would be in rougher seas."



When it breaks, you'll find out about it here at the damage control station.

There's an obvious reluctance to make the games so realistic that they end up frustrating casual players. But there's also a reluctance to alienate the people hungry for a new naval sim. The options screens will accommodate both types of players, letting them decide whether to contend with realistic turning rates and acceleration, dud torpedoes, or realistic diving depths. And while there are no illusions that either title will have the mass appeal of *Myst III*, whose soundtrack has finally died down, GAME Studio and Ultimatum are hoping for a broad audience.

"I don't think the appeal of *Silent Hunter II* is going to be limited only to people who buy sub sims," says Ultimatum's Kundering. "The depth of the simulation and the intellectual challenge of gameplay should be alluring to gamers who enjoy, say, strategy games or flight sims or whatever. And the rich historical context means it can even appeal to folks who are non-gamers. We're convinced these sims will stir a lot of interest in, for example, an avid viewer of the History Channel." —Tom Chick

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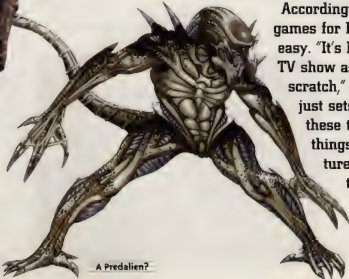


Aliens Versus Predator 2 takes you back to the surface of LV-1201 for some serious combat

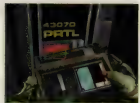
by Tom Chick

You might think a sequel to *Aliens Versus Predator* would be a cakewalk. The developers at Rebellion did a superb job of translating the look, sound, and feel of the movies into a first person shooter, so all the hard work has been done, right? All you have to do for the sequel is take an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach. Just re-do the original game into a new, higher-tech engine and, voila!, *Aliens Versus Predator 2* springs out fully formed (pun intended, considering the source material).

According David Stalker, the producer of both games for Fox Interactive, it's not quite that easy. "It's like writing an episode of an existing TV show as opposed to writing something from scratch," he explains. "*Aliens Versus Predator* just sets the initial conditions: there are these three creatures and these are the things you can do with these three creatures. Actually, to talk of initial conditions, you can ask how much of [the original game] was already designed by the movies. It's all about working within the greater framework of the existing license."



A Predator?



Stalker explains that there is a set of non-negotiable ground rules when creating an *Aliens Versus Predator* game: marines can't have giant laser cannons, aliens are fast and frail, predators can't teleport, and so on. But once you get past this list, there's lots of room to maneuver. This is where the new developer, Monolith, is taking the sequel in some new directions.

"You could almost liken it to what they did with the movies, using a different director each time," he explains in his soft Scottish brogue when asked about the decision to move the license from Rebellion to Monolith. Stalker looks like a burly British schoolboy, but he has a mischievous gleam in his eye, as if he were about to charge out onto a soccer field to start a riot. If you've ever visited any of the numerous message boards devoted to *Aliens Versus Predator*, odds are you've seen Stalker's name on some of the posts. He's well known for direct contact with the game's fans, but he's no mere company shill; he's obviously a longtime fan of the *Alien* and *Predator* movies, referring to them as "totally seminal works for me". Throw out an esoteric *Aliens* reference and he'll catch it and toss it right back. "If I weren't producing [the games] at Fox, I'd be producing a game that looked awfully like it somewhere else," he jokes.

Why don't you put him in charge?

The *Aliens Versus Predator 2* team at Monolith is composed mainly of the guys who made *Sanity* and the *Blood* games before that. Throw in a handful of level designers from *No One Lives Forever* and put William Westwater, the lead designer of Activision's *Call to Power*, in charge. A turn-based strategy game developer helming an action game? "I was also involved with *Battlezone* a bit and some of the *MechWarrior* stuff," he protests.

Perhaps the biggest change Monolith is bringing to the series is the storytelling and atmosphere they were able to create in *No One Lives Forever*. They first asked players what they would like to see improved in the single-player game. "The biggest thing we got back was that people didn't feel there was a place, a story, a kind of connected arrangement of events," Westwater explains. "They weren't really sure how their play as an alien fit into their play as a marine and as a predator."

"And in fact, it didn't," Stalker whispers by way of a mock confession.

So the sequel will take a single storyline and weave three threads through it, one for each race. "You know the movie *Rashomon*?" Westwater asks. "Each of our storylines is reflecting differently on the same events. We've embedded into the story events that are dramatic and visual enough that you'll recognize them when you're playing as one of the other characters. You'll go, 'Wait a second, I've been in this scene, only I was that character over there.'"

Aliens Versus Predator 2 takes place almost entirely on LV-1201, the location of a 10,000-year-old natural alien hive. Monolith wouldn't reveal any information about the alien or predator storylines (see sidebar), but they did explain the basic plot and how the marines get involved.

Marines we are re-tur nung

After the colony on LV-426 is destroyed in a nuclear blast at the end of *Aliens*, an expedi-



If you can see this, you're too close.

tion led by someone named Eisenberg visits the alien infested "space jockey" ship. This ship was the source of the eggs that led to the demise of the crew of the *Nostromo* in the first movie, and the colonists in the second. So it's no surprise that his expedition is wiped out. But Eisenberg himself survives under somewhat suspicious circumstances and manages to preserve data from the space jockey ship that points to LV-1201, where he discovers the alien hive and sets up a research station. The human storyline begins after the home crew loses contact with the research station and sends a group of Colonial Marines to find, rescue, and evacuate any human survivors.

In terms of how to tell this story, Stalker and Westwater mention *No One Lives Forever* (in fact, they frequently refer to "NOLF systems" in talking about everything from animation to AI). "As you know from *NOLF*," Stalker says, "there's a lot of stuff that can give the whole environment a great sense of being alive."

You cannot underestimate the simple act of two people talking to each other during game-play as a storytelling device. This was a lesson



Welcome to LV-1201. Lock n' load

Valve taught us in *Half-Life* and Monolith drove home in *No One Lives Forever*. Instead of the talking screens and the hackneyed "lone marine" of the original, *Aliens Versus Predator* the human storyline in the sequel will be all about being part of a team. You'll have unique teammates with distinct character models. As the story progresses, you can expect some casualties (although they'll be a scripted part of the story).

"We early on debated doing something like the *Battlezone* system of command and control," Westwater says when asked how they'll integrate the other characters into the gameplay, "but we decided they were more like the movie marines if we control them and have specific animations rather than if you're able to command them to go in any direction or do dumb things and get them killed. We try to make them more like real people and less like puppets."

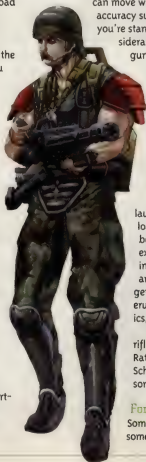
Packing state-of-the-art firepower

"When you're doing *Aliens* stuff, there are definite must-haves," Stalker explains as he shows off the new Marine arsenal. "The pulse rifle, the smartgun, the flame thrower. Then there are a couple of things that are should-haves and we went from there."

The new Marine HUD shows a picture of each weapon as you select it, scrolling down a list along the right side of the screen. Since many of the weapons have multiple ammo types, there is also a clear display of ammo types and amounts. Monolith is calculating specific magazine capacities, but unlike the original, the sequel will have a reload button so you can anticipate and control when you'll lose those few precious seconds swapping clips.

The pulse rifle is the same as in the first game with one exception: you don't see the LED readout for the number of rounds remaining. Why the change? "It's on the other side," explains Stalker, demonstrating how in the movie, a right-handed marine had to turn the rifle on its side to look at the readout. "We could have done it, but this time out we went for accuracy." Didn't they realize they'd put the LED on the wrong side in the first game? "That time we chose not to have accuracy," he remarks slyly.

The team discarded early experiments with a fireball mode for the flamethrower, so it and the smartgun are also identical to the ones in the first game. Of course, considering the more advanced technology of the LithTech engine driving this sequel, the weapon models are much more detailed. "Note the real-time thumb action," Stalker says. When you fire the smartgun, you can see the marine's left thumb pressing the trigger on the forward grip.



Fox hinted that there may be a working model of one of these.

Ten millimeter explosive tip caselless standard light armor piercing round

The basic pistol now has two types of ammo; clicking the right mouse button swaps out clips with armor piercing rounds or dum-dum rounds. Similarly, the SADAR rocket launcher from the first game is returning, but you will be able to choose unguided rockets or target-tracking homing ammo. The minigun is also returning, but this time you

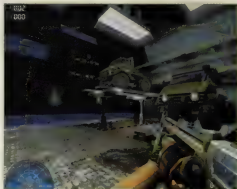
can move while firing it, although your accuracy suffers even more than when you're standing still and fighting its considerable kick. You can spin the minigun's cylindrical barrels up by holding the right mouse button. This means that as soon as you press the left button to feed ammo into the chamber, it will immediately fire at full speed. The drawback is that you're making so much noise you might as well announce your presence over a PA system.

Also returning is the grenade launcher and two of its standard layouts. The timed grenade explodes after a short time and is ideal for bouncing around corners. The proximity grenade sticks to a wall and explodes when someone comes near. But unlike the original game, it lasts indefinitely rather than exploding automatically after 20 seconds. There are also two new loadouts for the grenade launcher: spider mines, which get up and run after anyone who passes nearby, and EMP grenades, which erupt in a cloud of blue lightning that will knock out a predator's electronics, unclocking him and possibly disabling him for a short time.

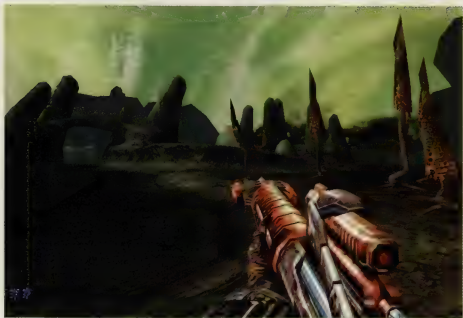
The marines also have a railgun, which is the equivalent of an instant kill rifle with a sniper scope that uses a laser rangefinder to display distance. Rather than the expected blue spiral seen in so many railguns since that Schwarzenegger movie, *Eraser*, Monolith is hoping to give their railgun a sonic contrail like the ring you see when a jet breaks the sound barrier.

For those really close encounters

Some of the new weapons are a direct result of player input, even though some of the things players asked for didn't seem to make sense. "They wanted



There probably won't be working models of these.



Explore exotic alien worlds. And kill things.

a knife and they wanted Hicks' shotgun," says Stalker, shaking his head in disbelief. "A shotgun? Why would you want a shotgun? Aliens would eat you before you ever got the chance to use it. We couldn't believe they wanted a knife. So we had a meeting and we said, 'Look, if we have to put a knife in, what the hell can we do with it?' We spitballed some great reasons you'd want to have a knife," he continued, "and we gave them what they wanted because we were able to come up with some really great gameplay reasons for you having the thing."

"It means we can have missions where you end up with only the knife," Westwater explains. "A situation arises where you're down to your knife and you've got to show some resourcefulness you didn't have to if you just had the pistol, where you'd still be able to reach across the room and drop someone dead." Westwater promises they won't be resorting to any of those cheap annoying tricks where the game conveniently takes your weapons away just to keep things challenging. It sounds more like they're building puzzles around the knife. Westwater also refers to another specific use for the knife, but he refuses to elaborate other than making jokes about replicants demonstrating their hand-eye coordination on unsuspecting marines.

The shotgun isn't quite Hicks' pistol grip shotgun from *Aliens*. Instead, Monolith has created an advanced pump-action Remington-style combat weapon. Load it with shells that fire a spread of shot or slugs that hit a single location for a lot of damage. Hudson's electronic lockpick from *Aliens* is also making an



Cruising for aliens.



With the game's model component system, all predators won't look like this.

What Fox doesn't want you to know...yet

There were a few topics that Monolith said were off-limits for this article. For instance, they wouldn't discuss their plans for multiplayer games or the alien and predator storyline or gameplay. However, they did let a few details slip.

Unlike the original, the multiplayer game will use a client/server model with support for a built-in game finding routine like GameSpy.

However, the setup options won't be as complex or comprehensive as they were in the first game.

The game's LithTech engine supports character models swapping out components other than just weapons. This means you can have a unique marine with or without his helmet, wearing various bits of armor, or sporting different emblems or battle tokens. This will also be used for various predator models representing different "tribes," or styles of predators. And there will be at least one occasion when a predator is unmasked.

The alien storyline will begin in the hive before the humans or predators arrive. Producer David Stalker draws a parallel between the opening of the alien campaign and the scenes in the special edition of *Aliens* that show the human colony before disaster strikes.



appearance. Westwater brings up a little electronic box with dangling alligator clips that can be used to open certain doors and ammo boxes.

"Another one of the things people loved from the second movie was cutting stuff open and welding stuff shut," Stalker says. "So now you can cut stuff open and weld stuff shut." He shows off the welding torch, complete with the tiny folding visor. You can clearly see certain areas scripted into the level design where the torch and electronic lockpick will work, using an interface like their equivalent in *No One Lives Forever*.

Because they mostly come at night, mostly

Finally, the marines now have a shoulder lamp that shines a bright powerful beam straight ahead. Like *Half-Life*'s flashlight, it's powered by a battery that will regenerate itself over time when it's not being drained. Since the same battery also powers the marines' image enhancer, and since flares are now pick-ups

The predators know about the alien hive on LV-1201 and they've frequented it in the past. At one point, Stalker poses the question, "If you were a predator and you could travel, what would you like to hunt? You might have certain places that you've learned over time had excellent specimens to hunt." Later on, in describing the mission areas, he mentions a volcanic basin protected from storms, located on the far side of the hive, opposite the human research station. He refers to it as "the predator hunting grounds."

There are two models for chest-busters, one of which is clean and the other covered in blood. There is also conceptual artwork of cocooned humans. We're assuming this points towards in-game chest-buster sequences.

The "villain" of the story, Eisenberg, has hired a security chief with a cadre of loyal mercenaries. This might indicate some sort of marine Versus marine combat. There are also parts of the game that take place on the assault ship Aurora, although these may be the equivalent of in-game cinematic sequences or perhaps a tutorial.

Stalker and Westwater say the most widely requested weapon for the predator is the net from *Predator 2*. Considering their willingness to work in shotguns and knives for the humans, it's hard to imagine that they won't include the net. On the alien front, Stalker categorically states that the alien will not be able to spit acid, even though it's a common request and an advanced alien ability in *Alien Resurrection*. "The beauty of the alien is that it has to be in your face to kill you," he says.

like ammo, humans no longer have unlimited power to see in the dark.

"The shoulder lamp is also about you being seen," Stalker explains, "There's a trade-off like with the flares, which were like a trail of bread crumbs leading an alien to you." The lamp is certainly an impressive effect. Westwater creeps down a long narrow corridor with the bright beam piercing the darkness in front of him. When an alien drops down into the glare, it's a jarring effect, similar to the scene in the first movie when Tom Skerritt's character swings his light around in the Nostromo's ventilation shaft and suddenly faces an alien. The lighting effects in the original are surprisingly effective for how limited they are, but tricks like the shoulder lamp in the sequel allow for even more creepy situations.

The power of Monolith's LithTech engine is certainly one of the most dramatic changes. The original *Aliens Versus Predator* still holds up thanks to the varied



Guess who's coming to dinner.

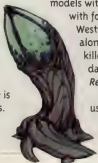


The minigun in action.

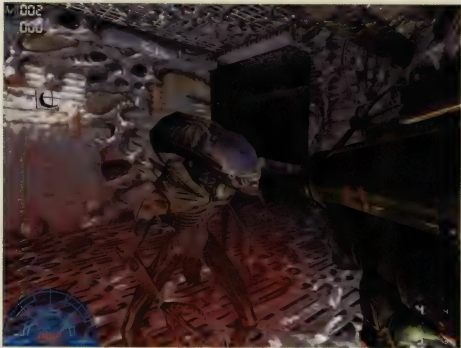
gameplay for the different races, but the engine looks awful compared to more recent first person shooters. A simple walk through some of the incomplete levels in *Aliens Versus Predator 2* shows some of what LithTech will deliver: more detailed character models with higher poly counts, dynamic lighting effects, wide-open outdoor areas with foliage, and explosions and water that aren't clunky polygonal tricks.

Westwater stands at the edge of a deep pool with water dripping from pipes along the ceiling. Remember the "rain chamber" where Harry Dean Stanton was killed in *Alien*? Remember when Newt is dropped into a shoulder-high pool of dark water in *Aliens*? Remember the underwater sequence in *Alien Resurrection*? LithTech can do all that.

Monolith is also making liberal use of the animated light maps that were used in a few places in *No One Lives Forever*. This lets them do things like throw a moving shadow from a ceiling fan or have light spill into a dark room as a door opens. Westwater also shows off some of the outdoor levels



ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR 2



Hold on a sec while I change weapons.

set on the surface of LV-1201. Although the vaguely moon-like terrain resembles LV-426, it's not as barren. Since this planet supports a hive of aliens, it needs an ecosystem. There are little beetles, huge lumbering quadrupeds, and giant mosquito-like bugs, all of which will register on a motion detector and wreak havoc on a marine's nerves. There are strange trees and fungus-like plants, some of which explode in a burst of toxic gas when you get near them. Because LV-1201 has a breathable atmosphere, there are also surface storms with lightning and wind. Westwater looks straight up and peers into the eye of a magnificent storm. A huge funnel climbs into the sky with lightning flickering behind the slowly swirling clouds.

Movement all over the place

Of course, gorgeous skybox effects and funky alien creatures are a dime a dozen. But LithTech really had to flex its muscle for some of *Aliens Versus Predator 2*'s unique demands. Whereas Rebellion built its technology from the ground up specifically for the things they wanted to do in the game, it had to push LithTech in directions it was never intended to go. Stalker says the alien's wall walking has been an enormous headache. He also mentions how difficult it is to do the different vision modes for each race, especially considering their dynamic lighting and animated light maps. And of course, balancing the level design for each race is no easy task when you have an alien who can go nearly



Beware of predators offering a friendly game of Frisbee.

anywhere. This has basically meant that Monolith is redoing the level design for each character even when they're visiting the same locations. So much for saving development time by telling a single story. "Basically, we have to make three games and put them in one box," he sighs.

Stalker says there will be no marine jetpack or predator grappling hook in *Aliens Versus Predator 2*. In the original, there were points in the single player game in which one race gets to visit a level from another race's single-player game. For instance, the alien could unlock a marine base or a predator dwelling.



Some of the scariest corridors are the ones that look empty.

LithTech Heads for Third BIG CHANGES FOR THE LATEST ITERATION OF THEIR TECHNOLOGY

Remember when LithTech was a game engine made by Monolith, and was just called "LithTech?" They're certainly getting picky—now they have a totally separate company devoted to its development and support called LithTech Inc., and they've started to refer to the engine and tools as the "LithTech Development System" or LTDS. It's an effort to separate the product from the company.

LithTech is about to unveil the spring release of the LTDS, version 3.0, which is not the version being used for *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, includes several new architectural changes as well as major graphics features focused on DirectX 8. To begin with, the networking structure has been radically altered, which should allow multiplayer games to scale more widely, and gives developers more control over the flow of game information over the

network. There's also a new system in place to find and prioritize the objects that are most important to each player, so the most important network traffic goes through first.

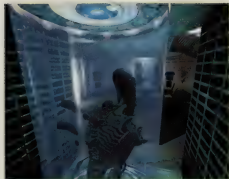
Other architectural improvements include a new physics framework that is simpler and more efficient, and uses standard units like meters, kilograms, and seconds instead of arbitrary "game units." There's a new 2D Window Tool Kit as well, which should make it easier for LTDS licensees to make 2D interface elements (inventories, health meters, stuff like that).

When it comes to graphics, the LTDS version 3.0 is the beginning of broad support for DirectX 8 features. The new RenderStyles Editor tool allows users to design and test a custom rendering style and view it in a window before incorporating it into a



LTDS version 3.0

game, which should come in handy when defining the look of common materials like polished steel,



The new pensive alien.

This meant Rebellion had to figure out some way to let the marine and predator navigate alien levels, which often consisted of huge vertical drops and tricky shafts. Their solution was the marine jet pack and predator grappling hook. "It was just a kludge," he says, "it was totally to get us into nooks and crannies we wouldn't get into otherwise." Since they're telling a story with a unified level design, there's no need for these tricks in the sequel.

Something else you won't find is the original's initial difficulty level.

The learning curve for the races, particularly the alien, will be "squashed down," as Westwater puts it, citing instances when new players would give up on the alien campaign before finishing the first level. If they couldn't get used to the wall walking, they wouldn't be able to find the exit on the ceiling. "We're using the fact that we have more story elements to introduce what appears to be narrative, but they're also hints about how to play," he says, explaining how they can use the conversation system from *No One Lives Forever* as a de facto tutorial. Also, unlike the original game,



What kind of wrist watch is that?

you'll be able to save your progress as many times as you want from any point in the game. However, Stalker gleefully points out that if you play at the highest difficulty level, there are no in-game saves allowed.

Unlike Paramount, with its uneven handling of the *Star Trek* license, Twentieth Century Fox has been pretty careful with the *Alien* and *Predator* properties. Other than *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, there's a tactical combat game called *Aliens: Colonial Marines* being developed for the PlayStation 2 by Check Six, a group of former Activision developers. There is also a third unannounced action game in development. "We're being very judicious with these franchises," Stalker says, "and we're keeping to their central messages. With something like *Star Trek*, the central message is 'we'll all work together and it'll be great.' Which is lovely. I'm a huge *Star Trek* fan, don't get me wrong. But it's not very visceral. A lot of *Aliens Versus Predator* is fear, and scaring you with things in the dark. And playing things in the dark. You get both sides of it."

Or, in the case of *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, all three sides of it. □

THE GOODS

GENRE Action Adventure

PUBLISHER To Be Determined

RELEASE DATE Winter 2001

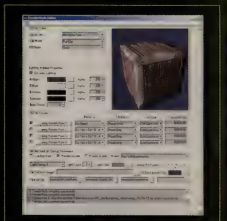
wooden boards, glass, carpet, etc. It also should make it as easier for level designers and 3D artists to define how their work should look without the help of graphics programmers.

Light maps, which are commonly used in 3D engines to "paint on shadows" for world objects, can now have different resolutions on each brush (a brush is a building block of the 3D world). This lets the level designers save memory by using very low resolution where it's not needed, such as in an area that's totally in shadow, while increasing resolution on lightmaps where detail is needed. Lightmaps are now 24-bit color instead of 15-bit color as before, which should help alleviate ugly "banding" artifacts and allow for more subtle lighting.

Users can now model brushes within 3DS Max

not just terrain. They simply check an "as brush" box in the Max exporter and, if the geometry complies with the normal rules for brushes, it exports a brush in the normal LTDS file format which level editors can use in their levels. In addition, level designers working in DEdit (the main LTDS world-building tool) can adjust the attenuation of a light by visually manipulating a graph or choosing from a list of presets. Naturally, they can create their own custom presets as well.

The first game to use LTDS 3.0 is still a bit of a secret, but it's not being made by Monolith and is currently scheduled for release in the Fall. In the meantime, LithTech will give demos of the tools and technology at the Game Developers Conference at the end of March. —Jason Cross □



LTDS version 3.0

A New Era Has Begun...

Cossacks - European Wars is a historical real-time strategy based on events during the XVI-XVIII centuries in Europe when nations and states were created and demolished, gold was turned into numerous armies, and never ending wars shed oceans of blood.

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- A huge technological hierarchy of more than 300 upgrades
- Unlimited variety of tactical and strategic methods of land or sea war against enemies
- Full 3D landscape with real world physics



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MASSIVE (multiplayer) ENTERTAINMENT

**Playing
together
online...
yesterday,
today and
tomorrow**

By Mark Asher

"I knew I was hooked when I still wanted to play even after falling into a fountain and drowning because I had no idea how to make my character swim. I knew I was ensnared when I was was insta-killed by a computer-controlled character when I accidentally clicked on the attack button because I had no idea they were so mean."





Any player of Verant's massively multiplayer role-playing game *EverQuest* probably has a similar story to tell about their first five minutes with a game that has taken up a significant portion of their life. People like to describe computer games as digital crack, and while that's certainly hyperbole, the massively multiplayer online role-playing games come closer to fitting that description than any other genre.

The games more responsible for this new digital drug trade are *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Asheron's Call*. These games really are massive, too, in every sense of the word. The gameworlds are sprawling—players literally can travel for hours to get from one end to another. The games themselves are massively popular, combining for nearly 700,000 active accounts that generate nearly \$7 million a month in fees. The popularity of the games has even hit eBay, where accounts and in-game items have been sold for hundreds and even thousands of dollars.

Finally, the impact these games have had on the industry is also massive, with a couple of dozen new online role-playing games in development. You can't swing a broken mouse without hitting a game company working on one. The massively multiplayer phenomenon isn't new, however; the genre has a long if not always glorious history.

A short timeline of online games

The origin of the online role-playing game lies somewhere back in the distant days of the 1970s, otherwise famous for Watergate, Disco, and leisure suits. Here are some of the highlights of the history of online role-playing games, which at least are far more benign manifestations of cultural expression.

In 1979, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle developed the first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) on the DEC-10 at the Essex University, Colchester, UK as an experiment in shared memory techniques. A version of this game still exists today as MUD II. The source code was illegally released on the Internet in the 80s and gave rise to many variants. If your significant other spends too much time playing games online, blame these two.

Also in the late 1970's John Taylor and Kelton Flinn were attending the University of Virginia. They created a multiplayer fantasy game called *The Island of Kesmai*. Here's Taylor, quoted from his website, on how popular this game was. "By the time we were in graduate school, the game had grown so popular that we had to add lockouts and blackout periods so that people would have no choice but to study and go to class." If you're flunking out of school because you're spending too much time playing online role-playing games, blame these guys.

In 1982, Taylor and Flinn approached CompuServe with the idea of running *Island of Kesmai* and other games as commercial games on the service. By 1985 they were making enough that they rented an office and began hiring employees. After all, it only cost \$12 an hour to play *Island of Kesmai* on CompuServe at a blazing 9600 baud, and at that you were a low ping bastard.

By 1986, the first versions of *Xtrek* and *Mtrek* began to appear. While not role-playing games, these multiplayer space strategy games, derived from, ahem, a very familiar TV show did attract even more players to online gaming. Simutronics was formed the following year, and in 1988 it launched *Gemstone II* on Genie, which was undercutting CompuServe's rates with the bargain basement access fee of \$6 per hour.

Negotiations that would bring the world of *Ultima* online—at that point (in fact, it was always



called this internally at Origin) called *Multima*—began in 1990 between Origin, Kesmai and Genie, but no deal was ever finalized. The Jim Dunnigan historical strategy role-playing game *100 Years War* launched on Genie (it still exists today at www.hyw.com, believe it or not). TinyMUCK by Stephen White appeared and then he wrote *MOO* (not *Master of Orion*) which stood for "mud, object-oriented." Games like *LambdaMOO*, *Islandia*, and others based on White's work began appearing. DIKU muds, so named for the Danish university where the family of games originated, are released and eventually become one of the inspirations for *EverQuest*, which incorporates some elements also found in DIKU-type games.

In 1992, a MUD called *Genocide* appeared, and it was the first to allow player-killers (PKs). MPG-Net was founded and launched *Kingdom of Drakkar*, which is still running today. Simutronics debuted *Cyberstrike*. QuantumLink renames itself America Online, and billions of floppies and CDs later, it merges with Time Warner to become some unholy alliance. The Sierra Network also launched that year.

Ultima Online, Third Dawn. Check out the dragon with the new 3D graphics.

EverQuest (bottom) "The Snowfang Gnolls on the new continent of Velious."



A big step

In 1992, id Software released *DOOM*, and multiplayer gaming really took off, at first on Local Area Networks. News Corp (owned by that Rupert Murdoch guy) bought Kesmai that year, and AT&T purchased The Imagination Network (the new name for the Sierra Network) for a reported \$50 million (and later sell it for a fraction of that). LegendMUD started and features the work of Raph Koster ("Designer Dragon" of *Ultima Online*) and others.

In 1995, id Software began testing *Quake*, which eventually kicks first-person multiplayer gaming over the Internet into high gear, and launches the reign of the first-person shooter. Kali launched that same year, providing the ability to play LAN games like *DOOM* and *WarCraft II* over the Internet. *Gemstone III* launched on AOL and Archetype Interactive began working on *Meridian 59*. Origin also started work on *Ultima Online*.

Meridian 59 eventually launched in 1996, and Sierra's *The Realm* and *Dark Sun Online* went into beta testing. Origin shows *Ultima Online* at the video game trade show, E3. A number of online networks are announced or started, including Engage, TEN, and Mplayer. Sony's 989 Studios, which is later spun off and then repurchased by Sony, began working on *EverQuest*. *Furcadia*, created by Dr. Cat and others, also opened.

The next explosion

The entire online role-playing scene exploded with the launch of *Ultima Online*, the first of the "Big Three" (which includes *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call*). *Ultima Online* quickly grew to over 100,000 subscribers despite severe launch problems. Turbine began developing *Asheron's Call*, which Microsoft ultimately published. *Neverwinter Nights* on AOL is shut down when AOL switches to WorldPlay (formerly INN, the Sierra network AT&T bought and then sold) for its Games Channel.

Verant's *EverQuest* entered beta testing in 1998, while Origin was sued in a class-action suit over *Ultima Online* (it's settled out of court). Cyber Warrior announced *Rubies of Eventide* (which is still in development in 2001), and Lyra's *Underlight* launched on Mplayer.

EverQuest finally launched in 1999 and quickly surpassed *Ultima Online* as the most popular online game. Later that year Microsoft released *Asheron's Call* and while popular, it has yet to match the success of its predecessors. TEN changes its business plan and name, dropping hardcore games, including *Dark Sun Online*, and becomes pogo.com.

Since then a number of games have been announced and a few have actually gone live, but none have matched the popularity of the big three.

The big three

Although online games have been around for decades, it wasn't really until *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Asheron's Call* appeared that the online role-playing game became a mainstream genre. Here's a quick look at these trend-setting games and what's in store for them.

Ultima Online

Developer: Origin Systems
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Released: June 1997

This is the game that launched a thousand competitors. It had a number of problems at startup and rather limped along for awhile, but players still couldn't get enough of it. Currently it has 225,000 subscribers and continues to grow. It's also the best of the big three for playing on a laptop, with its 2D graphics and relatively low system requirements. It's already had one major update, *Renaissance*, and Origin will ship a 3D-enhanced expansion in the coming months, *Third Dawn*.

Upside: Unmatched for the level of interactivity it provides, *Ultima Online* has a robust skills system that allows players to have "careers" in the game that don't really require hacking and slashing. No other game has housing that players can set up and decorate. It's also purely skill-based, which means that players can get a relatively powerful character in short order, unlike the other two major competitors, which require a higher



time investment. It also handles player-versus-player combat better than the other two games.

Downside: It's a bit dated looking, though many prefer its isometric view to the first-person 3D perspective of its competitors. The player-killing stuff can really get in your face if you don't care for it. The economy has been wrecked in the past by duping (exploiting bugs that allow you to duplicate items). It's also hard to find fresh "real estate" to plunk down a house even if you can afford one.

The Future: *Ultima Online* is getting a major upgrade with an expansion, *Third Dawn*. Not only will this expansion add new land, monsters, and items, it will add 3D graphics to the game. Looking at an early version, it's really a more dramatic change than screen-shots indicate. The spell effects are nifty, characters and creatures look nicer, and it simply adds a lot of visual appeal to the game. Besides the cosmetic benefits, *Third Dawn* will allow Origin to update the game with new content much more easily. It's also compatible with the current 2D client, so no one will be forced to upgrade.

EverQuest

Developer: Verant
Publisher: Sony Online
Released: March 1999

This is the online game everyone loves to hate and hates to love. It's the big bully on the block with 330,000 active subscribers. Say what you want about this game, but Verant hit on a popular formula: attractive first person graphics, a deep class-based system, lots of monsters to bash and items to collect, and a high fantasy (read: Tolkienesque) setting. Verant has released two expansions for this game, so the game world keeps getting bigger and better.

Upside: Great graphics, great variety of character types and options, and fascinating group dynamics. There really is an art to playing with a group in this game, and good group players can reap substantial rewards.

Downside: Some classes are significantly better than others, the non-combat options (skills) are mostly an afterthought and unrewarding, and it takes a long time to reach high levels, which are necessary if you want to visit much of the game world. Players often camp on the spawn points of the best monsters, making it hard to get the really good loot and experience.

The Future: Verant's Brad McQuaid teased us with a promise for yet more *EverQuest* content in the future: "We will continue to add content, refine gameplay, and keep the technology current. While it's too early to announce anything specific, I can say there are big plans for *EverQuest*'s future and we're very excited about it."

Asheron's Call

Developer: Turbine
Publisher: Turbine
Released: November 1999

Asheron's Call is the most recent of the big three and, if you're keeping score at home, is in third place, subscriber-wise (Microsoft does not disclose subscriber numbers, though developer Turbine estimates the number at around 100,000). It had the



smoothest launch and has had fewer problems than the others, but it never generated as much buzz as the other two games. Part of that may be the inevitable comparisons to *EverQuest*. Both games are first-person 3D games and both games are heavy on the hack and slash. Microsoft's effort just isn't as strong graphically, and its unique fantasy world, while certainly creative, may not be as appealing as *EverQuest*'s very familiar Tolkien-esque setting, with its bog standard dwarves, elves, giants and goblins. Would you rather smack drudges or orcs? Judging from the numbers, the orcs have it.

Upside: It's creative, the world is geographically seamless, and Turbine is continually adding in new story arcs, so there's always new content. You can do some cool things like scribe your own books. Creative players have even made ASCII art on scribbles and sold it in the game. Characters are infinitely customizable.

Downside: Besides graphics that lag behind *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call* sports a game system that is both class and skill-based, and the skills aren't well-balanced, so players tend to flock to the same sets. Also, the unique fantasy setting is a bit weird; you have to warm up to it, as it isn't very familiar.

The Future: "As always we're continuing to do the monthly events for the players," says Turbine's Scott Herrington. "We are doing a lot more events that are tailored more specifically to the players. We're also constantly trying to balance out the reward with the risk. We've also talked about porting it to the Xbox, but right now we want to concentrate on the PC. Finally, we're also working on a couple of unannounced projects."



Asheron's Call
(top to bottom) Turbine has improved the graphics engine since the game launched.

These drudges look much more menacing now than when the game was released.

Perhaps no game has more beautiful skylines.



Legends of Kesmai
(above) One of the earliest, Legends of Kesmai was still being played until 1999.

Days of future past

These "big three" didn't just pop-up out of the ether; there are many games that laid the foundation. They may have been trailblazers, but none achieved the popularity that today's giants have secured. Part of that is no doubt due to the lack of high-speed connections—remember, some of these games were played with 2400 baud modems. None of these games really ever came close to matching the depth of today's epic games, either, with the exception of some of the text-based MUDs. You can't play these games anymore, but you may have fond memories of them.

Legends of Kesmai

Developer: Kesmai
Publisher: Kesmai
Year: 1988-1999

The genesis of this game stretches back to 1982 when Kelton Flinn and John Taylor formed Kesmai. They started with text-based MUDs like *Dungeons of*

Kesmai, and *Island of Kesmai* which became the graphical *Legends of Kesmai*. They went from AOL to the Gamestorm network, and Legends was subsequently shut down when Electronic Arts purchased Gamestorm in 1999.

Legends was a simple hack and slash level up game with graphics that had long since slipped into obsolescence by the time EA pulled the plug, but it still had a fervent, if small, following. EA migrated the players into *Ultima Online*.

Neverwinter Nights

Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Beam Software
Year: 1999-2000

This was an online game based on the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition rules, and the game system that powered the popular "Gold Box" games fromSSI. It lasted for six years before AOL pulled the plug in 1997. It was set in the Forgotten Realms in the Sword Coast, the same area where *Baldur's Gate* takes place. It was a typical hack and slash game—fight skeletons, dragons, orcs, and more while you gain levels and items and get access to more difficult quests. It also included player vs. player combat, and the game saw some guilds started devoted to that, including some that have carried on to other online games.

When AOL moved from a pay-by-the-hour plan to an unlimited usage plan, they got rid of games like *Neverwinter Nights*. One of the problems was that they were obligated to pay the creators for usage by the hour, and with unmetered usage players were able to run up the bill for AOL.

Meridian 59

Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: AOL
Year: 1998-2000

Meridian 59 probably came the closest to achieving the breakthrough status that the big three subsequently claimed. According to a 3DO representative, it peaked at about 30,000 paying users. It had some devoted fans that became volunteer guides, much like the guides that, until recently, assisted in the running of both *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*.

The game was plagued by poor customer service and there were a number of player killers who drove some players away. The game. 3DO struggled with different pricing plans, switching to a flat rate and then back to metered access before the game died. 3DO abandoned the game finally in face of dwindling popularity and decided that their business model was traditional games. They have no plans for another one. Interestingly, many of the players and even some of the guilds that formed on 3DO's servers migrated en masse to *EverQuest* when that game launched.



Neverwinter Nights It's not massive, but it's multiplayer *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Finally, we're getting an updated tool to take the place of *Unlimited Adventures*.

Meridian 59 (far right) Though primitive looking now, *Meridian 59* used a first-person view before *EverQuest*.



Dark Sun Online

Developer: TEN
Publisher: TEN
Year: 1996-1999

When TEN started one of the draws of this fee-based gaming network was *Dark Sun Online*. This game used the single-player *Dark Sun* game engine, from SSI's series of AD&D-inspired RPGs. By the time the game launched the engine was already a bit dated. The game itself had problems both with unbridled player-versus-player conflict and a lack of developer updates. When players started to hack the game and the developers were slow to respond, that was the game's death knell.

TEN eventually became Pogo.com and changed its focus from hardcore gamers to card games and casual entertainment and discontinued this game that featured deserts, swamps, psionics, and exotic races like half-dwarfs in the AD&D *Dark Sun* universe.

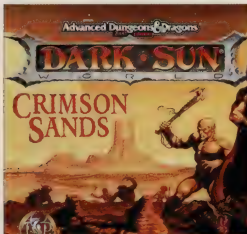
The present

Besides the big three, there are a few other online role-playing games you can play today. Well, be accurate, some aren't RPGs in the strict sense. Sega's *10six* is a weird strategy/shooter hybrid and Monte Cristo's *Star Peace* is a builder. Even these are massively multiplayer, though, and they all have some role-playing elements.

Gemstone III DragonRealms Hercules and Xena

Developer: Simutronics
Publisher: Simutronics
Year: 1993, 1995, and 1998

You can call these old-school games; they're all text-based MUDs with a little bit of browser-based



graphical trappings, but they rival the big three in terms of complexity and depth. Simutronics has done a fine job of providing an "army" of gamemasters who generate a lot of in-game events. These games have developed a community following that may be more hardcore than even the big three have been able to generate.

While these games may last for years due to the loyalty of the players who play them, it's also safe to say that they will never come anywhere near the popularity of the big three. Simutronics has carved out a niche. They hope to do a graphical game called *Hero's Journey*, but have had problems retaining development staff and finding a publisher to fund it.

Kingdom of Drakkar

Developer: WPC-Nor
Publisher: Enterlamper
Year: 1992

This is a top-down view role-playing game that debuted in 1992 and which you can still play. In fact, most areas in the game are free to play now. You can get a free account at www.icecentral.com/drakkar. It's a hack and slash, level up game with an abundance of skills and monsters, and character classes like Mentalist, Martial Artist, Fighters, Thief, Barbarian and Healer.

10six

Developer: SegaSoft Networks Inc.
Publisher: Sega
Year: 2000

This is an action game with a dash of real-time strate-



Kingdom of Drakkar (left)
Although quite dated, you can still play the Kingdom of Drakkar on iEntertainment.

10six (above)
Assaulting a base.

Dark Suns Online (left)
The engine in Dark Suns was taken from the single player games of the same name.

Dark Suns Online didn't survive TEN's conversion to Pogo.com.

Hercules and Xena (below) Simutronic's commercial text-based game is no doubt popular with fans of the show.



gy building tossed in. You claim a patch of land and defend it with a variety of weapons and structures you build, but you can also drop into first-person mode and attack other players.

Mankind

Developer: Vibes
Publisher: Cryo
Year: Available Now

Mankind is a 3D real-time strategy game that combines space battles, political affairs, trading, quest, and power. You control a fleet of ships, colonize planets, and build an empire. And of course other players

will try to steal your empire, grab your planets, and destroy your fleet. Vibes is offering two ways to play. You can download a demo that limits the number of units you can control, or you can pay \$49 for a yearly subscription fee.

Allegiance

Developer: Microsoft
Publisher: Microsoft
Year: Available Now

Allegiance isn't a persistent world game. It's more like an online-only game that combines the real-time strategy genre with the space sim genre. Up to 32 players

The Book of Genesis

Let there be cooperation

by Cindy Yama

"The lighthouse of Alexandria, the Sphinx, the Pyramids—you can't build them alone"—at least not without a winch...a really big winch. Developer eGenesis in Pittsburgh has lain low for the last few years watching the trend in massively multi-player role-playing games, working on its business model, testing focus groups, and developing a custom programming language. It has recently come forth with information about its first project that shoots holes in the premise of just about

every other game out there. The premise? Don't shoot holes. Don't shoot monsters. Don't shoot anything except, perhaps, the breeze.

A Tale in the Desert is attempting to offer us a year of pay-to-play role-playing action with no combat. It dares to challenge the eternal paradigm of "hunt things, kill them, take their stuff, sell it off, buy better stuff, gain a level, loop until boredom sets in" by replacing combat-oriented character advancement with activity- and task-based development.

Set in ancient Egypt, the game is essentially a role-playing game with adventure and strategy elements. You will control a character, with statistics, levels, skills and inventory, and will be able to construct buildings. Rather than the "vanity castles" littering the landscape of *Ultima Online's* Britannia, the structures will be more utilitarian in nature, acting either as tools-to-an-end, factories, training centers, markets, or storage areas.

While there is no combat, that is not to say there's no conflict, for without conflict how can there be drama—and without drama, entertainment? Expect politics to play a large role in the game mechanics. Gameplay is heavily influenced by a dynamic legislature in which you'll be able to go to the Great University of Leadership and create a petition to change something in the game-world—either a rule, a law affecting player behavior, or other game staple. Once you create a petition, you need 1000 signatures from other players, which you can collect either by yourself (for days on end) or with the help of other recruits. When all 1000 signatures are registered, this triggers a vote. If, after a 24 hour window in which to cast votes, a majority of players decide in favor of a petition, eGenesis will have a programmer change the rules of the game on-the-fly thus "signing it into law." eGenesis does, however, have ultimate veto power. If you decide to alter the game in a way that defies world physics, for example, eGenesis can say, "Right. When pigs fly."

Rather than gaining experience via monster-bashing, your character advances by completing, participating in, or leading large projects. 49 steps also await you (apologies to Hitchcock). According to eGenesis, the 49 challenges are based on

ancient Egyptian writings about *Seven Disciplines of Man*: Leadership, Thought, The Human Body, Architecture, Worship, Conflict, and Art & Music. (I'll take the Human Body for \$1000, Alex).

Here are some of the challenges you will face:

Leadership: The challenge of *Trust*. To complete this challenge, you need to bury a significant amount of gold deep in the desert, and then travel one mile away from it. Next, you must tell ten friends where you have buried it and wait for 24 hours. After that time, you can go dig up the treasure. If it's there, then you gain a level in leadership; if not, you're screwed and there is no penalty for the thief. At least you'll find out if you have 10 friends.

Art & Music: The challenge of *Fireworks*. You must gather, make, or trade for various resins and alchemy supplies, and then assemble them at a laboratory. Using these supplies, you will design a pyrotechnics display. In a nightly contest, all prepared exhibitors will light up the sky with their entries. Spectators vote, and the winner has completed the *Fireworks* challenge.

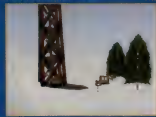
Worship: The challenge of *Ritual*. You need to coordinate a group of 40 people to enter the Sacred Grove near the Great University of Worship at sunrise. Each person will stand a granite platform and: 1) Demonstrate humility by bowing, 2) Demonstrate ambition by kneeling and then reaching to the sky, 3) Demonstrate permanence by assuming Pyramid Stance, and 4) do naked cartwheels and howl at the sun, er, scratch number four. If any participant breaks the silence by chatting or otherwise emoting, the challenge is a failure.

You will be able to take on all challenges, but it should be evident that many will require days of planning, and may take several tries to be successful. The developers say that it's essentially impossible for a single player to complete all 49 challenges within the one-year time span over which the story unfolds. Once you have attained level seven within any one of the disciplines, you have become a "master" of it. Only masters are able to complete the ultimate goal within the discipline.

So, you can see that this type of game design is quite unique compared to rest of the past and present role-playing games. Will it work? Giving the political environment over to players (DoDz!) is an immense challenge. Will it be fun? This probably depends upon how married are we to the kill-sell-kill paradigm. Will we ever find out? Let's continue to look toward Giza. ■



Daylight at the Oasis.



The large structure is a Deep Well.



They are sentinels, silently running.

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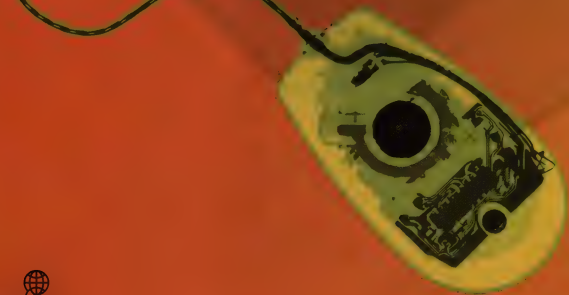
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battle it out in a game that combines harvesting, research, and space battles.

Star Peace

Developer: Funcom
Publisher: Funcom
Year: 2001

Star Peace is a massively multiplayer game of economic building. You start out with a stake of money and attempt to build a business empire on a newly colonized planet. It's a lot like a *SimCity* in this regard, but instead of controlling a city, you are playing alongside other players. There are over 300 different structures you can build, multiple items to research, and so on. *Star Peace* is just the first in a line of several that will connect, with the developing planning role-playing and action modules down the road.



StarPeace: This is out now. It's *Sim City* on an alien planet. You can build over 300 structures.

What lies ahead

There are literally hundreds of online role-playing games in the works, most of which hope to get you to fork over a monthly fee. It remains to be seen how many of these games the market can sustain. And some of the games may never make it to release, given the expense of finishing these games and setting up the technical infrastructure necessary to support a massively multiplayer title. The games listed are in order of their theoretical release.

Neverwinter Nights

Developer: Funcom
Publisher: Funcom
Release Date: 2001

Neverwinter Nights is a bit of a hybrid online game. It



Neverwinter Nights: This is a Christmas screen. It's one of perhaps many Korean games we will see. This is a Christmas screen.

RedMoon: (right) It's a Korean game with some anime influences.

won't support more than 64 in a game and can also be played offline in solo mode. It will ship with an editor that BioWare is promising will be full-featured and easy to use, so we may see a lot of mod activity spring up around this game. Supposedly, you can create games where a live *Dungeon Master* will control the action, or where the AI will handle those tasks.

You will be able to create a character that will advance in levels, and BioWare has plans for secure servers that will allow players to "check-out" their character for play and then check them back in, with the idea being that this will prevent *Diablo*-like hacking. The game will use the new *Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition* rules. Look for a huge feature on the game in next month's issue.

Anarchy Online

Developer: Funcom
Publisher: Funcom
Year: 2001

This should be the first science fiction role-playing on the market, assuming you classify *10six* as more of an action game. One of the interesting things about this game is that FunCom has a four year story arc already planned that covers the conflict between the Rebels and the Omni-Tek corporation. Players will also be able to build their own quests and will have randomly spawned dungeons that will be generated in-game for groups of players looking to receive a mission. This game is likely to be the next major game released, so a lot of people will be watching it to see how deep the online market really is.

Lineage: The Bloodpledge

Developer: NC
Publisher: NC
Release Date: 2001

Lineage: The Bloodpledge is one of Korea's most popular Internet games. This fantasy game of orcs and elves resembles *Ultima Online* and features battles for control over towns and castles, a magic system with over 50 spells, gambling events, dogs (yes, you can have pets), and a rather elaborate item creation system that has you following formulas to create items like bracers. Here's an example: "Kick/punch until it gives you 3 bark of ent. Hunt for 5 lumps of rough mithril in elven forest/cave. Trade 5 lumps of rough mithril for 100 lump of pure mithril from fairy Kick/punch until it gives you pan's mane or it speaks. You need 20 of them. Talk to Archne and trade 20 pan's mane for 20 thread. Talk to Archne and trade 100 lumps of pure mithril and 20 threads into 20 mithril threads. Go to Nerupa and make it." Got that?

RedMoon

Developer: JoyCity
Publisher: JoyCity
Release Date: 2001

RedMoon is another Korean game. This one's set in an anime-styled science-fiction world. It offers players both pre- and post-cataclysmic settings. There are nine character types that players base their characters on. Players will battle spies and cyborgs, cast spells, and so on with no limit on the levels the players can attain. The real hook for this game is the anime setting. Players will also be able to email items to one another in the game and JoyCity promises constantly updated quests.

Dark Age of Camelot

Developer: Mythic Entertainment
Publisher: Mythic Entertainment
Release Date: In beta now

Mythic has made a number of online games, including *Spellbinder*, *Dragonsgate*, and *Silent Death Online*. So it's a veteran in this field in some ways. *Camelot* is an Arthurian game with three factions: Vikings, Celts, and Brits. Each faction will have its own adventure areas in which player versus player conflict within the faction isn't allowed. The ultimate goal that players will build for will be to adventure in the rival faction's areas and engage in player-versus-player combat against enemy players. The game will also feature a trade-skill system that will let players create just about any item that vendors sell. It should be out in 2001.

Shadowbane

Developer: Wolfpack Studios
Publisher: Gathering of Developers
Release Date: In limited beta now

The fantasy-themed *Shadowbane*'s big strength will be its complex player versus player conflict. In fact, they're rebuilding the game around this controversial feature. As to the style of play, it will be level-based and Wolfpack has said that they want the gameplay style to be similar to *Diablo*, though the game uses a 3D engine. There will be guilds that can control territories, the ability to form alliances, and so on. Player races include elves, humans, elfborn, dwarves, half-giants, shades, and irekei. There are four basic character classes: fighter, healer, mage, and the rogue, but as players advance they can then specialize in one 18 advanced character classes, such as a druid, crusader, assassin, and more. Wolfpack also plans a number of ongoing quests.

The Sims Online

Developer: Maxis
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Release Date: 2001

You can expect to play a version of *The Sims* in a mas-

sively-multiplayer world, with the focus being on social interaction. Character advancement may be similar to the original game—get a job, improve your dwelling, etc. It looks like players may compete by getting other players to visit their homes or businesses they set up. Like Sony Online's *Star Wars* game, this game could be huge.

Motor City Online

Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Release Date: 2001

Race for pink slips. Pull into the burger joint and show off your ride. This is "persistent-state hot rodding community" for car lovers. You'll be able to buy, sell and customize hotrods, including classics, stocks, muscle cars and customs. You can even sell custom paint jobs to other players. Of course the racing will be a big draw too, allowing players to race on the back streets or in a sanctioned racing circuit for the Motor City Cup. As you earn money you can better customize your car as you buy or swap hot rods and car parts from dealerships, parts shops and junkyards. You'll also be able to listen to songs on your car "radio."

Ultima Worlds Online: Origin

Developer: Origin Systems
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Release Date: 2001-2002

Origin is an ambitious game for Origin. It's moved to a really snappy 3D graphical engine, done tons of motion capture so players can perform some wild combat moves, and designed an odd, Todd McFarlane-like gameworld that consists of a traditional medieval fantasy, a *Jurassic Park*-like setting, and a futuristic steampunk setting. The combat moves are actually part of the advancement system. As your character advances, he or she will learn some new moves, so when you see another player doing something you haven't seen before, look out. *Origin* will include some non-player-versus player areas, but will also allow players to attack each other. *Origin* will feature a level-based system that combines with a detailed skill tree. It will also feature a player-driven economy, but things like housing will not make it into the initial release. This one's sure to command a lot of attention as it goes into beta testing sometime in 2001.



Dark Age of Camelot: (top of page) This game will be a lot like a team-based role-playing game.

Shadowbane: It will be heavy on player-versus-player combat and is highly anticipated.



Motor City Online: (top left) A Firebird lays some rubber on the road.

(bottom left) Cruisin' online. (right) An Olds is the first car through the gate.

Rapping with Raph

Raph Koster is the point man on Star Wars Galaxies, the LucasArts and Sony Online game that folks are predicting will be the first million-subscriber online game. As "Designer Dragon," he was also one of the creators of Ultima Online and is a veteran MUÖder. Although unable to discuss specifics on the Star Wars game, he did talk about online role-playing games in general.

How different will million-dollar rapping game development be from the Ultima Online and EverQuest?

Well, how far in the future do you want to go? In ten or fifteen years, I am not sure what you will be able to recognize.

A big hurdle is going to be getting the large companies to surrender their fear of user-generated content. Right now, everyone is terrified of it for legal reasons and for customer support reasons. But the entire premise of the Internet is distributed, user-generated content. I see it as inevitable that this become the dominant form of online world. A big question, though, is how one makes money off of it. 90% of everything is crap, according to Sturgeon's Law, and handing over the creative reins to the players isn't going to change that. And those who are good at it are going to want to make money at it, which means they'll join the companies making the games in the first place, or start their own.

Will players be a more independent economy to compete in the online business?
Depends what they are trying to do. Right

now, the benchmark everyone seems to use for "success" is that a game gets around 100,000 paying subscribers at \$10 a month. Running a world for 100,000 paying subscribers is not something a small independent company can do. Or rather, they can do it, but they won't be small anymore!

Creating the games is still a wide-open field, in my mind. Yeah, there's some moderately tricky tech involved, but it's frankly not that arcane and becoming less so every day. I may be biased, as a designer, but I think that the design of virtual spaces is a much tougher nut to crack than the technology. But sure, a small, talented, independent company can do it. Plenty are. It costs a lot of money, but you can get that and still stay reasonably independent. I foresee the budgets of these games continuing to rise, though.

The harder part is running the games. There's a big difference between making a TV show and running the cable network. I think that indie companies can do fine at running games, but not at that 100,000-subscriber level.

What's the biggest mistake that you made with Ultima Online?

Naivete. We were naïve about the number of people we'd get, the way they'd behave, the amount of bad behavior we'd get, the appeal of the concept... It manifested in things like the many problems with player killing, the way-low sales forecasts, a lack of awareness of what it would take to run the service, mistaken priorities in the game design and technology... On the other hand, I think that if it



had not been for that naïveté, it couldn't have been what it became. It takes a certain amount of cluelessness to go tilting at windmills, you know?

What was the biggest reward?

The first, I think, was more a credit to the Ultima name than to the game itself. It opened up the market a lot. I think it took a big well-respected universe like Ultima to make that possible.

I think that we were successful in making a more dynamic environment than what was the norm. We got that amazing player economy, we got those player towns, and theater troupes—shoot out to the Golden Brew players here—and just this stunning array of guilds and the like.

Lastly, I think that it will be remembered for a long time as a pivotal stage on which some of the big cultural debates about online worlds were played out. I don't think the gulch between the role-players and the powergamers, or the PvPers and the peaceniks, was ever so apparent as it was in UO, precisely because all the different groups found it a viable home. ■

Jumpgate

Developer: Netdevils

Publisher: TBA

Release Date: Q2, 2001

Jumpgate is a persistent sci-fi universe. It's basically *Privateer* or *Elite* in a massively multiplayer universe. Players will engage in ship combat, trading, smuggling, research, and more. Use money to upgrade your ship and hire new pilots to command a fleet. This game should make it out in 2001.

Neocron

Developer: Reakttor Media

Publisher: Reakttor Media

Release Date: 2001-2002

Despite *Planetside*'s claims otherwise (see below), *Neocron* is actually the first massively multiplayer first-person shooter. It's the 27th century and the Earth isn't looking too good, so we've colonized other planets. *Neocron* takes place on one. *Neocron*, besides being a shooter, is also an "e-community" (*Neocron* is the name of the city), and Reakttor says that players can also enjoy the game in non-violent ways. The city should be

safe most of the time, as it's patrolled by powerful non-player characters (police and robots), but the surrounding outlying areas known as the outzone will be where most of the first-person shooter action takes place. *Neocron* will use a skill-class system that will allow players to be hackers, fighters, and Psi-masters, among other things.

Planetside

Developer: Verant

Publisher: Sony Online

Year: 2001-2002

Anything Verant does now is big news, and *Planetside* looks promising. It's basically a faction-based shooter, with money and implants taking the place of gaining levels. Verant knows that fans of shooters like a level playing field, so any player will be able to kill another, unlike *EverQuest* where low level characters cannot even scratch high level ones. The big question with a game like this and *Neocron* is lag. Can a massively multiplayer shooter with thousands of players online avoid lag issues? That can be a deadlier killer than any player.

Arrgh!
The cheats the old man
gave me are useless.

Button-mashing fool!
Happy Puppy has made
my kung fu stronger.



*It is written,
the wise know when to cheat.*

The wise also know not to get cheats from some old dude living in a hut. The most up-to-date cheats, reviews, and demos for games on every platform are all free for the taking at happypuppy.com. It's great for regular gamers, drunken masters, and even old dudes living in huts.



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Atriarich: (above) Embassy where the Cavolon Scientists meet with other player characters to solve diplomatic concerns between Factions.

(top right) "Tyrusin Warrior overlooking the suspended combat Arena. At the end a player-constructed fortress has been erected.

"The red Buldra can be tamed and ridden by players. It is flying over a Warrior's Arena."

World War II Online

Developer: Cornered Rat
Publisher: Strategic First
Release Date: 2001-2002

What this game is attempting to do is create the virtual battlefield, something that wargame fans have dreamed of for some time. As such, you can be an individual soldier in the trenches or in command of a tank, or you can also battle in the air or on sea. Players who have advanced in rank can even take command and issue orders to other players. Cornered Rat has made one controversial decision, though. They've eliminated Nazi insignia. *WWII Online* uses a 3D engine that's already looking dated, but that should make the game accessible to slower computers. While this game may not satisfy turn-based fans of historical warfare, it's refreshing to have an online game set in a historical context. Orcs need not apply.

Atriarich

Developer: World Fusion
Publisher: To Be Determined
Release Date: 2001/2002

Atriarich is another science-fiction game in the works. There are no humans in this game, but there are some humanoid. It allows players to build not just homes but entire cities. As such, you can expect a detailed economic system as well to go along with the usual adventuring that we've come to expect in these games. You'll even be able to form an army of NPCs and wage war. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of



the game is the developer's promise that players will be able to have an impact on the game world and change it. If *World Fusion* can pull all this off, that might be worthy of a science-fiction story in itself.

BigWorld

Developer: Micro Forte
Publisher: To Be Announced
Release Date: 2003

Micro Forte, who developed *Fallout Tactics* for Interplay, is also hard at work on a cyberpunk action-oriented game called *BigWorld*. *BigWorld* is a former penal colony (*Micro Forte* is located in Australia) and will include dynamically generated missions, player-versus-player conflicts, factions, and more. It utilizes a third-person view and will start players off knowing nothing of their past and have them discover it as they play the game. There are three playable races: Human, a bio-mechanical Cybrid or a tribal alien Beziel. *Micro Forte* promises that their server technology will allow thousands of players to gather in one area for concerts or wars. Concerts? Although the science-fiction field is wide-open now, by the time this game is released it may not be.



Big World: (bottom left) It is being developed by *Micro Forte*, the team who developed *Fallout Tactics* for Interplay.

World War II Online: (bottom right) This game will let you be part of massive battles and also allows you to fly planes.





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Caeron3000:

Get ready to battle some ugly aliens.

Sovereign (below) It's a massively multiplayer strategy game.

Sovereign

Developer: Verant Interaction

Publisher: Sony Online

Release Date: 2001-2002

Sovereign is a massively multiplayer real-time strategy game that promises to have much more depth than the typical games in its genre, with diplomacy, spying, alliances, trade routes, and many other features that almost make it sound like a turn-based *Civilization*-style game. Unlike most online games, **Sovereign** games will begin and end with a winner. The persistent element is the player's character, the "ruler" as it were, who will be used in each new game and can accumulate experience and goodies. This game has been in development for a long time now, and it makes you wonder if it's proving to be a bit harder to pull off than initially anticipated.



Earth and Beyond

Developer: Westwood Studios

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Release Date: Unknown

Not much is known about this Westwood Online title other than that they claim it's been in development for years now. Westwood is planning on releasing more information about this game soon; they originally scheduled, then canceled, a press event for the game in January.

Star Wars Galaxies

Developer: Verant

Publisher: LucasArts

Release Date: 2002

This is one of the biggest of the online games in development, headed up by ex-*Ultima Online* developers in

Austin for Sony Online. At first the guess was that it would be "EverQuest with Jedis and Stormtroopers instead of Druids and Orcs." Now, it seems like it will be substantially different, with more emphasis on skills instead of leveling, if we can go by hints from the developers on the messageboards. And no, you won't be able to play as Luke Skywalker or any of the other classic characters, and you won't be able to kill Darth Vader. You may bump into these characters in the game, though. As to when this game will be out, take a wild guess and say Sony and LucasArts are shooting for a release around the time the next movie is released in the Summer of 2002.

EverQuest 2

Developer: Verant

Publisher: Sony Online

Release: Date Unknown

Although Sony Online hasn't released any information about this game, or even formally announced it, you can bet that it's under construction and has been for some time. About all we know is that it will use a much more powerful graphics engine and you can expect that the developers know a lot more about how these games work after their success with *EverQuest*. Whenever this game is released it should be a huge title.



Project Entropia

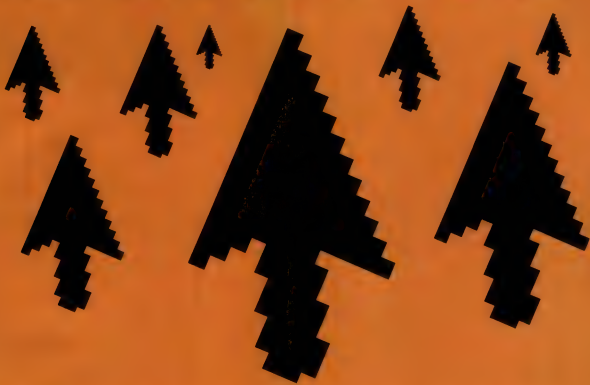
Developer: MindArk

Publisher: MindArk

Release: Date Unknown

Project Entropia is a sci-fi game with a couple of interesting differences. It will be free to play, but to purchase items in the game you will be charged real money. This of course raises all kinds of interesting questions, such as

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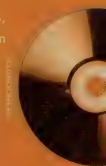


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"What's the return policy and do you ever have blue light specials?" And of course, will it be a case of he who has the biggest bank account wins?

Caeron3000

Developer: Magique Productions

Publisher: To be Determined

Release Date: Unannounced

Caeron3000 is yet another game going for a science-fiction setting instead of fantasy. This one's set Andromeda, one million light years away from us. Players start on the planet Andraeus, which is inhabited by five different races who have been mutated by years of radiation. You will be able to travel from planet to planet via spaceship, also. Death is permanent in this game, unless you've cloned yourself. The game will feature planetside and space battles, bounty hunters, and even in-game newspapers that might feature your latest bit of infamy.

Horizons

Developer: Artifact Entertainment

Publisher: Artifact Entertainment

Release Date: Unknown

Horizons is one of the more ambitious games in development. It promises to let the player be a wide variety of characters, from angels to vampires. There will be governments in the game. There will be trade routes. There will be trade skills. There will be a faction system and the game's combat will focus on player-versus-player conflict, though there will be built-in penalties for killing within your own faction. Maybe one of the biggest things this game has going for it is its fervent fan-base.

Galcom Online: Dare we invoke the name of Derek Smart? Hope and skepticism walk hand in hand in the *Battlecruiser* universe.

Horizons: This game has a devoted following.



Galcom Online

Developer: 3000ad

Publisher: 3000ad

Release Date: 2001-200...

Who knows? While Derek Smart is working on a sequel to his controversial *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*, he's also working on a massively multiplayer version of *Battlecruiser*. Besides space battles, you'll also be able to do planetside and wreak havoc in an ATV. Can he pull it off? Who knows.

Dungeons & Dragons Online

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Infogrames

Release: Date Unknown

This unannounced title has apparently been in development for some time now, although it was part of a tug-of-war between Hasbro Interactive and Wizards of the Coast for awhile. With the sale of Hasbro Interactive to Infogrames, the rights to this game also were transferred to Infogrames. We should hear some kind of formal announcement about this game soon.

Middle Earth Online

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Sierra (for now)

Release: Date Unknown

Who knows about this game? Sierra laid off the development team and is currently in the courtrooms with the Tolkien estate over the rights to do *Middle Earth* computer games. A *Lord of the Rings* game would seem like a natural, but this one may be years away even if Sierra does get their claim established by the courts. A tie-in with the upcoming movies would make a lot of sense, and since Electronic Arts has the digital rights to produce games based on the movies....

Warhammer Online

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Unknown

Release Date: Unknown

We've heard a couple of rumors of this game. "It's a text-based MUD." "No it's a full-blown graphical game that's being jointly developed with Microsoft." If there were a game in the works, it would have the advantage of drawing upon a well-fleshed out game universe based on Games Workshop series of miniatures game. *Warhammer* games haven't been particularly successful on the PC, though, and Games Workshop has been having their own problems of late with their existing business line. ■



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SPACED STATION

by Tom Chick

Startopia was originally going to be released last year, but because of various delays and an initially optimistic sched-

ule, it was pushed back to a 2001 release. How appropriate, considering its setting on a donut shaped space station twirling slowly in the dark. Cue the *Blue Danube Waltz* and prepare for a slow stately balletic experience. No, wait, nevermind; this is a game from Mucky Foot. Perhaps the *Looney Tunes* riff would be more appropriate.

Although Mucky Foot might not like being remembered this way, it's a group of former Bullfrog employees. You'd never guess its roots after its first game, *Urban Chaos*, a rather prosaic running and gunning third person shooter. It was the sort of thing you'd expect to see on a console system and it had none of Bullfrog's distinctive humor. "[IT] WAS VERY DIFFERENT TO THE STYLE OF GAME BULLFROG WERE KNOWN

FOR," recalls Mucky Foot's Gary Carr in his distinctive telegram style, "WE MADE A CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO BE DIFFERENT SO WE WEREN'T CONSTANTLY TAGGED AS A EX-BULLFROG START-UP. IT WOULD BE FAIR TO SAY THAT STARTOPIA BARES MORE RESEMBLANCE TO SOMETHING WE MAY HAVE DONE AT BULLFROG, BUT WE DON'T FEEL THE NEED TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT JUST FOR THE SAKE OF IT NOW."

You might be wondering why Carr speaks the way he does. Although were given free run of an early playable version of *Startopia*, the Mucky Foot guys in England are a curious bunch. Designer Carr dashed off replies to a few of our questions, writing in all capital letters, without a spell checker, and often completely ignoring the questions. Combine this with the company's wacky sensibility and Carr's answers read like something spit out of a sentient computer on the verge of going haywire. Imagine 2001's Hal as a character in *Brazil*, a sort of strange construct that's come to be known as the Carr-bot. When *Startopia* is finished, the player will be guided by the droll British robotic narrator. But for this preview, there are only a

[Top to bottom] Zedem Monks don't normally have green spots, but this fellow's sick. Scuzzers droids building a star dock.

Startopia

is strange trip into the world of Mucky Foot

(Image by Jeffery) A trader docks with the station, ready to take on these medical supply crates. We don't know what "skint" means, but we figure this siren wasn't too eager to work for us.



handful of sporadic comments from the Carr-bot, which we have translated into semi-coherent English.

Wheel in the sky

The Carr-bot explains that the basis for *Startopia* is the donut shaped space station. "We wanted to do a god game which was actually a game," it says. "Most in this genre are more experiences than a game. We thought that the torus, with its 16 segments and three other players, made the perfect starting point for a game board... we developed the gameplay on from this.

"Torus" sounds awfully dignified in a Euclidean kind of way, but it's hard not to prefer the immediate recognition factor of calling it "donut shaped." Actually, considering that the space station is divided into sixteen segments, like the slices of a bundt cake, it's more accurate to refer to *Startopia*'s setting as "a bundt cake shaped space station."

The premise is that there are a number of gutted derelict stations across the galaxy that need to be patched up and rebuilt from within. Your role is an entrepreneur given control of one of a station's segments. As you build it up,

you can expand by paying money to open the airlock doors that separate adjoining sectors. At one point, the Carr-bot refers to *Startopia* as "A game of occupation with set boundaries." Each slice of the bundt cake shaped station is a separate area and each airlock is a boundary. When the great doors slowly slide open, it is a minor spectacle: what had been an imposing wall is suddenly a wide-open frontier. The longer you play, the more boundaries come down, and eventually, you're playing along a long thin curved surface.

The bundt cake shaped space station has three levels. The bottom deck, the one furthest from the hole in the middle of the bundt cake, is where the station's day-to-day operations take place. Here you build sleeping berths, cargo storage, recycling plants, factories, sick bays, docking stations, and so forth. The middle deck is the center of commerce and recreation. Here you build shops, inns, motels, and recreational facilities like viewing galleries and combat arenas. Throughout you can build incidentals like benches, lamps, litter bins, and monuments. Much as *Star Trek* has its multi-level chessboard, *Startopia* might be considered a multilevel *RollerCoaster Tycoon*.

At the very top, along the inner layer, is a level covered by a glass skylight through which you can see the stars. This is the biodeck. Think *Silent Running* or the groves in *System Shock*. It's a terrarium where you can raise and lower terrain and set temperature and moisture levels. You do this by using a paint program inter-



(left to right) A security station attacks an escaped prisoner.

Security stations scanning the area near a group of detention centers.

face, in which you select a brush size and type, and start drawing your landscape. It's like playing with clay, pushing valleys, pulling mountains, and then brushing moisture or heat onto your sculpture.

"You can recreate the climates of different planets to attract their inhabitants," the Carr-bot intones. "You can also farm the land to provide real food for your visitors rather than the synthetic stuff the replicators produce. Not to mention medical supplies, black market goods, building materials, and many other more lucrative items for you to discover and profit from."

Traders will occasionally visit your station if you build a docking station to receive them. The race of the trader will determine what he has for sale and what he'll pay for the things you're selling. A simple pattern emerges in which you can buy certain goods from certain aliens at low prices. For instance, thanks to eons of mutilating cattle and experimenting on abductees, Greys sell cheap medical supplies, which can be sold at a premium to other alien traders.

Reinventing the wheel

"We have a nasty habit of designing an engine for the game we are creating, then starting fresh for the next project," the Carr-bot chirps. "This doesn't make life very easy for us... no wonder we aren't rich!"

The fact that Mucky Foot has built their engine from the ground up probably accounts for some of the delay, but the result is an engine that satisfies a number of *Startopia's* demands, such as scale, varied terrain, and detailed character animation. You can zoom in on rat-like vermin hopping among the trash or you can zoom all the way out of the station to look down into your biodeck from outside the skylight. In addition to the right-angled polygonal surfaces of buildings, the engine renders the biodeck's natural terrain and its curves

gracefully along the sloping interior of the station. Since the curve means you can never see more than a few segments at a time, the bundt cake shape serves as a de facto limit on drawing distance. If you listen closely, you can hear the programmers' sighs of relief.

Lending it a distinctive sense of humor and personality, *Startopia's* engine supports a lot of vivid character animation. Once you've built your station up, the decks bustle with activity, all wide open to your scrutiny. An alien DJ floats around the disco on a hover pad. Medical machinery scans patients in the sick bay. A robot organizes cargo crates like a librarian arranging shelves of books. Sirens in Love Nests, which are the G-rated equivalent of brothels, engage in some sort of weird airborne electrical interaction with their clients. The farming aliens till soil on the biodeck. Every now and then a space ship heaves into the docking bay with goods for sale. *Startopia* is indeed a gawker's delight.

Early in its development cycle, Mucky Foot had plans to include first-person shooter missions, similar to the way you can inhabit one of the creatures in Bullfrog's *Dungeon Keeper* games. Although those plans were scrapped for reasons the Carr-bot didn't feel inclined to share, the engine still supports extreme close-ups. With the streamlined camera control interface—hold down the middle mouse button and you're flying the camera—or the snap views, you can go anywhere. "If you press the spacebar when the alien interface is open," the Carr-bot proclaims, "You go into shoulder cam mode, so you can dance in the disco or use any of the facilities from an alien perspective."

Cosmic energy management

Although Mucky Foot calls it a god game, you don't feel quite so removed while playing, mainly because you can get in so close. It's much more like being a store manager. You can

walk the floor or you can watch from a second story window, but it all looks and feels very immediate. This is partly due to the fact that the game world is cut into small segments, further divided between three decks, so the camera never has to range very far. The game's mechanics aren't very god-like either. You're not "miracling" things into play; you're buying the blueprints and then building structures with Scuzzter bots. And although the coin of the realm isn't quite as cosmic as mana, neither is it quite so pedestrian as mere money.

"In this world, *everything* is energy," the Carr-bot explains in its Owen Meany squeak. "If an alien gives a positive emotion from an experience in the game, this 'outpour' can be collected as matter. So for example, a laugh has a higher energy count than a smile."

While in the version of the

**"We visited
and discovered
AWOL. We found
around on the
ing some alien
fallen in**

game used for the article there's no visual indicators of whether an alien was laughing or smiling, you are able to select an individual alien and ask it how it felt about factors like hunger, entertainment, love, sleep, health, and so forth. Press a mood icon and the alien will nod, shake its head(s), shrug, or make a "so-so" gesture with its hand. Some aliens walk around with Sim-like thought balloons above them to indicate extreme moods.

As long as the bulk of your aliens are happy, you'll have a positive energy flow. This energy



(Left to right) Aliens retire to these rows of sleeping berths when they're sleepy.

Come in, have a cocktail, and enjoy the piano.



is collected and stored in a gratuitously reflection-mapped blob called an Energy Collector, which is the first structure you'll build in any scenario. You spend the collected energy to hire aliens, buy blueprints and supplies, and build structures. The metaphor gets a little shaky when you consider that the aliens you hire don't contribute energy to the pool any more. Rather, you pay them energy, which they can spend on goods and services in your station. If an alien isn't happy, he'll take his energy and leave.

To add buildings, you place a transparent layout and Scuzzers scurry into action to build it. These little guys will also repair damaged structures and pick up litter. When they're not needed, they'll remove themselves to a far wall and shut down until another

job comes up. Security Scuzzers operate continuously,

**the sensor
our Targ was
him mooning
biodeck, follow-
with whom he'd
love."**

so
you'll need
to build

recharger stations at which droids periodically plug themselves in. Over the course of a game, you can research advanced droids that use jetpacks to move around more quickly.

Although *Startopia* has no adjustable speed, and you can't pause and give orders, the action moves at a manageable pace. A message queue stacks icons along the left side of the screen, allowing you to read them at your leisure. Really important messages are color coded to get your attention. There's a

sortable screen to browse all the aliens and droids on your station, with the option to quickly zoom to anyone on the list so you can examine its dossier, which is liberally sprinkled with jokes.

Human Alien resources department

To guide your choice of which aliens to hire for your staff, *Startopia* rates every alien from one to five stars for skill, loyalty, and dedication. While playing the early build of the game, we hired a Targ to man the Censorship so we could receive docking requests from incoming traders. We eventually noticed no one was calling us, so we visited the sensor and discovered our Targ was AWOL. We found him mooning around on the biodeck, following some alien with whom he'd fallen in love. So we fired him and set out to find a more loyal/dedicated Targ.

Mucky Foot says there's an elaborate model behind the types of aliens that come to your station and how they behave. For instance, the types of structures you build in your station have an effect on who visits. You can build various expensive monuments, some of which are specific to certain aliens. The Katagukhat is a towering gold statue of a warrior alien. The Endeavor is a replica of the statue of the marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima, except it's a group of Salt Hog worker aliens. There are at least four kinds of bars you can build on the recreation deck: a rough bar (local dive), a recreational bar (the equivalent of a cheap beer joint), a cocktail bar (complete with a hovering lounge piano), and Sluggapartments (exclusively for the aristocratic Gem Slugs). Each of these appeals to different aliens, so your choice of which to research and build will set the tone for which aliens want to visit your station.

This version of *Startopia* had a sandbox mode, which let us play without time limits or objectives. But Mucky Foot wants the game to be more goal-oriented, so *Startopia* will ship with about twenty scenarios leading up to a

showdown against the galaxy's greatest space station manager, Arona Daal, a recurring character throughout the game. The early missions introduce specific races or structures.

Many of the missions in *Startopia*, and almost all multiplayer games, will eventually involve combat. You can interact with other players on the station by auctioning items or hiring assassins to kill an opponent's employees, but otherwise contact consists mostly of combat.

Star wars

When queried about combat, the Carr-bot unleashed a veritable flood of information. "Combat is loads of fun," it explains. "Any character is capable of firing a laser blast at another but only warrior races will fire under your command." It went on to say that non-warrior races will only return fire when fired upon, and once you have are next to another player you can choose to attack them. "Once combat has been initiated, you are able to target aliens and facilities for your army to attack," he says. "If the opponent is defeated or surrenders the segment, it becomes your property."

"To capture a segment, one of your droids has to be able to take control of the opponents bulkhead computer system. It would be foolish to send droids in until you think you have the upper hand because the opponents will defend the bulkhead as a priority. If you successful, the segment is closed and your flag is raised."

At this point, the Carr-bot apparently shut down, ignoring everything else it was asked, leaving the rest of our questions to be answered when the game is released this summer. ■

THE GOODS

GENRE Spaced-out Strategy

PUBLISHER Tidos

RELEASE DATE June 2001



THE LAST THING YOU'LL EVER DESIRE

Battlecruiser and its developer Derek Smart are legends in the industry. First teased online in 1989, and previewed in this magazine in 1992, *Battlecruiser*

OAD seemed to be an amazing jack-of-all-trades, a dream simulation for space gamers and science fiction fans alike. Imagine being able to command a starship in a living universe, managing your crew, flying fighter craft, and even engaging in ground combat—all in a single game.

Unfortunately, ambition got the best of *Battlecruiser*. Creating such an elaborate game environment was a daunting task, and publisher Take 2 decided it was putting the game out before Christmas, 1996 period. They shipped what was essentially an alpha, along with criminally poor documentation. After pouring over seven years of effort into the game, developer Derek Smart saw his baby shoved out the door prematurely in a practically unplayable condition.

Many developers would have given up at that point, or moved on to new projects. But not Smart. *Battlecruiser* wasn't just a game to the man at this point, it was a passion. This was his dream game, and he was going to make it. Smart wrestled the rights to the game back from Take 2 and starting patching it. After getting the game playable, he enhanced it. In 1998, *Battlecruiser 3000AD 2.0* was released as a budget title by Interplay.

But by this time, it was a DOS game in a Windows world, with an interface more hostile than a Gammulan with a boil on his third buttock. Gamers willing to dive in, read the manual, and spend time really studying were treated to a space game like no other, but many were put off by the steep learning curve and dated graphics engine. It 3000AD finally worked, but it was too late. It sold well enough, but the soap opera-worthy stories of its development and the online attacks against its developer got more attention than the actual game in the end.

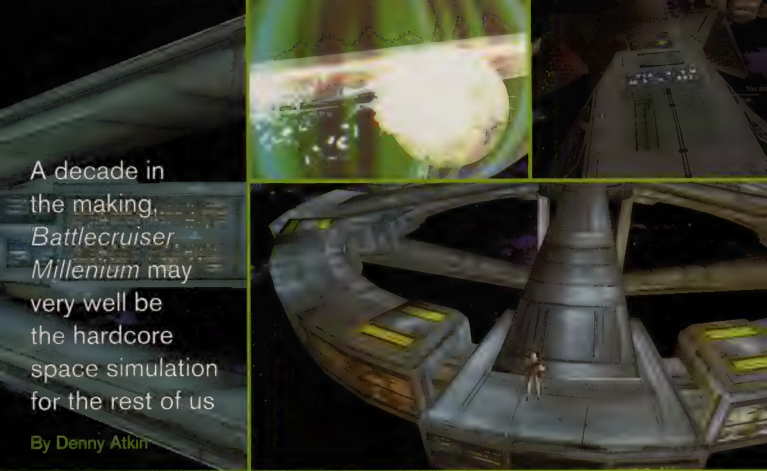
But the dream was not lost.

A New Millennium

Enter *Battlecruiser Millennium*. Although "humble" isn't a word usually used to

Joe Player is about to meet his maker.





A decade in the making, *Battlecruiser Millennium* may very well be the hardcore space simulation for the rest of us

By Denny Atkin

describe Derek Smart, the initial description of this new game belies the magnitude of the enhancements here. Reading the blurbs on the 3000AD web site, you might get the impression that this was merely a graphics and multiplayer upgrade. You'd be wrong. Even in beta form, it's obvious that *Battlecruiser Millennium* has what it takes to leave the series' stigma in the dust.

Battlecruiser Millennium is extremely open-ended. You can fight for the forces of good, fly for the bad guys, or just try to make a peaceable living as a trader. You can command a starship-sized Battlecruiser, defend your home planet in a fighter, play space trader in a shuttle, or even stay planet-bound as a pilot or foot soldier. Take on a campaign where you'll race to win the search for a powerful artifact, or play in "Roam" mode where you set your own goals. There are 13 species populating the galaxy, and your choice of which to play will affect not only your own goals and technologies, but also how the rest of the universe reacts to you.

Drop into a Valkyrie system as a Terran Battlecruiser commander and the Valkeries will happily demonstrate all their advanced weapons systems—by firing on your ship. Enter the same system as a Terran diplomat in an armed transport, though, and you're likely to be more or less ignored as long as you don't provoke trouble.

The Commander career gives you the most flexibility. While you will control the Battlecruiser and maintain its systems, you can also hop into a fighter for some fast combat, or fly a shuttle down to a planet and explore it in an ATV or on foot. And as you advance in rank, you'll eventually gain the ability to send orders

to the entire fleet. The strategic battles at this point in the game are fascinating. Tell a group of four Battlecruisers to escort you as you inflict some punishment on an enemy base and you'll command an amazing amount of firepower. Or prioritize the actions of literally dozens of craft as you repel an enemy attack on your homeworld.

All these choices will get even more interesting in multiplayer mode. Although it wasn't running yet in the beta used for this article, Smart promises that up to 16 players will be able to participate. Put everyone on the ground as Marines and play a *Tribes*-style game, with soldiers, medics, and scouts working together against the enemy. Fight great naval battles with everyone in Battlecruisers. Or mix and match. Smart also plans to use the game engine for a pay-to-play massively multiplayer game, *Galactic Command Online*, optimistically slated for the end of this year. He's planning support for 1,000 players per server and an even richer universe.

Engines of Destruction

Other than the significant addition of multiplayer support, much of this description would fit *Battlecruiser 3000AD*. While the design has changed little, the underlying code has been dramatically enhanced. The interface has improved significantly, the graphics are generations more advanced, and almost every aspect of the game is more solid and more detailed. The new 3D engine has a good level of detail, although at first glance you may not think it exceptional. Turn your *Battlecruiser* around and fly towards the space station orbiting your home planet, though and you'll where the

engine excels. Other games have made claims about having impressive senses of scale. Well, you haven't seen anything yet. The station dwarfs your huge Battlecruiser. But that's just the start. Send your commander into a shuttle and launch it. As you cruise around the Battlecruiser, suddenly it seems gigantic—and the station's that much bigger. Finally, don your virtual spacesuit and leave the shuttle. Drop to an external view and prepare to be stunned by the scale differences between your astronaut and the ships behind him.

At this point, you'll also notice the station slowly spinning away from you. It's not fixed in space, but rather orbiting the planet. Hang around a while and you'll see more traffic in the area. Not just enemy ships thrown in to harass you, but friendly and neutral freighters coming in to trade, and ships of all types passing through on their way to other systems.

The AI pilots for all sides act logically. If hostile ships come bearing down on your system, friendly fighters will scramble in defense automatically, and your station and planetary defense array will fire in self defense. Damage a bad guy's ship too heavily and he'll try to bug out. If a ship is disabled before it's destroyed, it will send out a SOS, and another ship may try to tractor—beam it to safety.

When battle ensues, special effects erupt. Beam and missile weapons let loose, and when a large ship is destroyed, it goes out with a striking, volumetric explosion. Again, the sense of scale is evident here. An energy weapon hitting a shuttle envelops it in an explosion, while a hit on a space station shows a much smaller, but no less detailed, blast. Hyperspace effects look particularly good, as do the animated,



Suicide wish? Attacking a Battlecruiser as a space marine. Note that explosion sizes give away how large the ship is.



Even gigawatt capital ships get blown to bits.



With missiles, you can take out targets at long range; note the video display at lower right.

pulsing wormholes.

All in all, the living space environment makes the "fly to waypoint, kill everything in sight, repeat" scenarios of the *Wing Commander* series look positively primitive.

Turns like a Battleship

One of the biggest disappointments in *Battlecruiser 3000AD* was the way the ships handled. Here was this ultra-detailed Battlecruiser with dozens of crewmembers, and it flew like a fighter. You could just imagine the crewmembers plastered all over the deck as the commander turned this gigantic ship around in mere seconds. No such problems here—the flight modeling is dramatically improved. The handling reflects the size and power of the craft. It now takes quite a while to do a 180-degree turn in a Battlecruiser. A fighter, on the hand, can whip around in an instant, and fly at twice the speed of the capital ships.

When you enter the atmosphere, you can fly in both standard and VTOL (vertical take-off and landing) modes. While the differences between ships are modeled well, the actual handling is more like that found in traditional space sims than in flight simulators. The physics are pretty simple—a Battlecruiser can stop on a dime, and Newton doesn't show his apple-

bruised head here.

In the version tested, most of the ground combat wasn't enabled, as Smart was still about a week away from integrating the new terrain engine. It will be very interesting to see how that plays out. While soldiers on the surface might seem like so much fodder to fighter craft, remember that some of them are equipped with anti-aircraft weaponry.

One particularly cool aspect of planetary combat is that craft and soldiers will be able to travel underwater. When you're in the water, you're invisible from radar—imagine lurking in a lake and planning an ambush. Smart foresees extending this concept and implementing underwater bases, ships, and units in the massively multiplayer *Galactic Command Online*.

Systems Management

Battlecruiser 3000AD has a rather arcane interface. In *Battlecruiser Millennium*, everything can be accessed using icons on the heads-up display and on pop-up menus. Still, there's a bit of a learning curve here if you're going to do more than fly a fighter or engage in ground combat. In addition to what's sure to be comprehensive documentation (*Battlecruiser 3000AD 2.0* ended up with a nearly 200-page manual, a far cry from the criminally skimpy pamphlet *Take 2* tossed into the first release), *Battlecruiser*

Millennium will include a number of training and instant-action missions to get you started.

Detail fans will love the ability to obsess over the Battlecruiser's operation. You can repair minute systems, manage crew assignments, task marines to look for possible saboteurs, and clone lost crewmembers. Sounds tedious? Then go for a fighter pilot or marine career and you won't have to deal with any of it. That's what's great about *Battlecruiser Millennium*—your options are endless.

Screw "The Man!"

In a day where game designs are being pushed more and more towards purely mainstream appeal, when innovative games are canned so companies can milk known-quantity franchises, Smart is creating a detailed game aimed directly at the hardcore, serious gamer. Yet it has production values that match many high-budget games, in addition to an unmatched scope of gameplay.

Smart has kept the game's integrity by not signing with a publisher during its development. Doing this, he doesn't receive financial support during development, but he also doesn't have marketing specialists telling him that focus groups thought the game was too complicated. Smart has created this game as an independent project, turning down publishing deals that threatened to dumb the game down.

Smart's crew of 17 is spread out as far as Russia and New Zealand. The MP3 soundtrack comes from a composer in Germany, while some of the 3D models come from The Netherlands. In fact, Smart has only met two of his team members in person. Yet this indie team has created a game that can compete with the big guns. It's enough to give serious gamers looking for depth in their entertainment hope for the future.

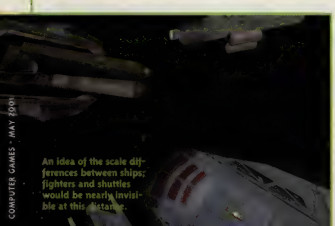
Will you want to give *Battlecruiser Millennium* a try? If you're a space sim fan, a sci-fi nut, or a gamer that likes detailed, immersive games, you will. Will the game be perfect and bug-free? Given its scope, probably not, despite the massive beta testing program currently underway. However, while games like *Freelancer* have promised a living, reactive universe, Smart and company are actually set to deliver one. And looking at the history of this series, it's a safe bet that Derek Smart will be around to support the game long after its release. Who'd be crazy enough to try to stop him? ■

THE GOODS

GENRE Space Simulation

DEVELOPER 3000AD

RELEASE DATE Summer 2001



An idea of the scale differences between ships: fighters and shuttles would be nearly invisible at this distance.

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The Rights of Gamers

by Jason Cross

I was recently browsing around some online game discussion forums, reading what people thought of the recent announcement that *Clive Barker's Undying* has gone gold. One of the first messages was "Where is the demo?" Have we really benefited from the benevolence of a handful of developers for so long that we not only expect demos, but also demand them before the game is even in stores? That's when it struck me: we gamers expect a lot of things, and we complain loudly if they think our rights are violated.

That's understandable in many cases, but we don't have a "right" to a demo. A game developer doesn't have some inherent duty to take time away from, say, completing their game, to put together a little self-contained piece for you to play with (and then take more time to support it). I can't wait until all the consoles get hard drives and online access. Console gamers have known that a demo is something special you're lucky to get, maybe on a magazine CD, but it'll take all of one month before they start demanding them once downloadable content becomes a reality.

It's funny what we seem to think we're entitled to. It really just proves that we have little idea what it takes to develop a game these days. Not only do the we cry out for a demo before the game is even available, but we also expect a whole bunch of free stuff after release. We want patches that add new features, free levels and game modes—you name it.

Guess what? We don't have a right to that stuff, either. Making quality game content takes more time than you might expect. Developers would rather spend it trying to meet milestones on their next project so they can continue to receive money from their publishers and pay for their kid's braces. Do we think Epic gave away all that free *Unreal Tournament* content out of the goodness of their hearts? Maybe, but it's more likely they wouldn't have been as generous had they not been creating new content for the Playstation2 and Dreamcast ver-

sions. Those levels and models were made for paying projects and released on the PC because, hey, why not use 'em if you've got 'em? If id Software wants to charge for *Team Arena*, maybe they should. And if you think it should be given away, maybe you should ask yourself why they'd spend a year working on stuff for *Quake III* when they could be working on the new *Doom* game.

We're not entitled to tools releases, either. If a developer wants to release an SDK or level editor, it's not like they can just upload it to an FTP site or something. These tools are almost always untested, buggy, unstable, and really only meant to be used in the closed environment of that one game development studio. It takes time (and therefore money) to clean these things up and document them to the point where it can be released, even in an unsupported form.

Oh, and the next time someone says that developers have a duty to release games on time, I'm gonna puke. Unless you're a shareholder in the publishing company, they don't owe you an adherence to any sort of schedule. These are games, folks. It's not like you won't get that kidney surgery if *Duke Nukem Forever* slips another quarter (or year).

What really surprises me is how we whine and moan all day about a company not providing any of these extras, and back it up with our wallets. I've seen far too many people who claim that they won't buy *No One Lives Forever* because Monolith didn't give away a bunch of

free stuff after their previous games, or who refuse to buy the new *Doom* game when it's released because id Software dared to charge money for *Team Arena* (yeah, like they won't cave on that promise).

Backing up your opinions with your money is a great way to do the publishers to listen, but shouldn't we do this about the stuff that really matters? Game developers and publishers are responsible for providing you with a game that works. Buggy-as-hell games like *Giants* and *Ultima IX* reach the market in that state because we let developers get away with it. While it's impossible to test games on every possible configuration, QA departments definitely push some games out the door with known bugs. If we stopped buying buggy games, believe me, they'd stop releasing them.

For that matter, when bugs are found in games, we do have a right to expect that they'll be fixed in a reasonable amount of time and through a reasonable patching process. Why my entire Windows installation can visit a web page to auto-update itself but none of my installed games can is beyond me. In other words, the patches we are owed do not necessarily have to add new stuff, but they should definitely fix what was in the box. We have a right to expect reasonable install and uninstall procedures, user interfaces that normal people can use, and working hardware drivers. In far too many cases, we aren't getting these things.

So next time you think about posting a message on a board to proclaim that you won't buy a product if they don't release a demo, or won't buy someone's next game because they're not giving away enough stuff for the current one, hold yourself in check. Find a forum to complain about the bugs in the game you just bought, demand that uninstall programs stop leaving empty directories all over your hard drive, and bitch about the video card driver glitch that has turned your \$50 role-playing game into a coaster. Hardcore gamers with Mighty Keyboard Powers can be powerful, but we've got bigger fish to fry than free demos.

Q: I was wondering it is possible to have two eight button game pads on the same computer. Also, do I need two soundcards for that or I can do it in some other way? Can I use one regular MIDI port eight button game pad and one USB eight button game pad?

Romano C.

A: There are a few ways you do hook several game pads to a computer. One way would be to have multiple joystick ports (either through a sound card or dedicated joystick controller card). You want to avoid that, though. A second way is to buy several Microsoft Sidewinder game pads—not the new Game Pad Pro, but the older model. These controllers have a joystick port located on the top of the pad, so you can plug one into the other. You can easily chain four Sidewinder Game Pads in this fashion using one joystick port. The other options, as you've noted, involve USB. You can plug a joystick into a game port and another into USB, or just use multiple USB game pads.

Q: I have just replaced my Voodoo 3 card with an Asus 7700 Pure GT52 card in Windows Me. The Asus drivers are v5.33a which are not Detonator 3 drivers. Which version of the Detonator 3 drivers would you recommend for me and where can I get them? Will installing non-Asus drivers mess up any of the Asus utility software that came with the card? If I want to overclock the Asus card, which tweak utility would you recommend?

Tony A.

A: I would suggest running the latest drivers from NVIDIA, currently version 6.50, which is available at their website (just head to www.nvidia.com, click on "support" and then "drivers"). There are leaked beta drivers all over the 'net, but those are unofficial for a reason, and anything not officially released probably has problems. Installing reference drivers may or may not mess up any of the utilities that came with your card. Most likely, those utilities are part of the driver set and would be replaced when you install the new one. The best thing to do is actually uninstall your Asus drivers before installing the NVIDIA ones. I wouldn't worry too much about your Asus utilities—you should be fine. There are plenty of good tweak utilities for cards with NVIDIA technology, and if you're comfortable searching around on the 'net and hacking your registry, you don't even need them to

overclock your card. A utility makes it easier, though: I suggest either NVMax (www.charm-leys.co.uk/nvmax/) or PowerStrip (www.entechtaiwan.com/ps.htm).

Q: I bought a computer from Dell about 5 months ago. I always read how people say they have their color settings on "millions of colors." Why does mine only have 16 colors, 256 colors, 16-bit and 32-bit true color? Is there something I have to change to get millions of colors or is true color millions of colors?

Matt S.

A: With each additional "bit" of color, you double the total amount of possible colors, since a bit can have two values (either one or zero). So 16-color graphics is 4-bit color (or two to the fourth power). 256 colors is 8-bit color (two to the eighth power). 16-bit is therefore "thousands of colors," specifically two to the 16th power or 65,536. 32-bit color is slightly trickier...it's typically 24 bits of color and eight bits of alpha, or transparency. It's still "millions of colors," exactly two to the 24th or 16,777,216, but with 256 levels of transparency. That's a bit more explanation than you were looking for, but yes, 24 and 32-bit true color is the "millions of colors" setting you're looking for.

Q: I've heard that when you have over 128MB of RAM, Windows doesn't take advantage of it. Is this true? If so, is there a way I can change this through RegEdit or something?

Rob C.

A: It's not true at all. I recently upgraded my home system from 128 to 256MB, since RAM is so cheap, and I've noticed quite an improvement in many tasks. You can prove that Windows is using RAM by watching the amount of allocated RAM using the system monitor tool—run enough applications, do some big file transfers, play with big files in Photoshop, Premiere, Media Player, etc., and you'll definitely see all your RAM used. In fact, our reviews editor Ben Sones just upgraded his home machine to 512 MB, and the 3D modeling programs he uses sped up quite a bit. RAM is generally cheap, and RAM is good. Get lots of it.

Q: Know anyone who might be interested in buying an IBM Aptiva E2U?

Kyle N.

A: www.ebay.com ■

G17 mopolis

MacWorld Tokyo and GeForce 3—On Wednesday, February 21st, Steve Jobs unveiled new iMacs, lower pricing for the G4 cube, and NVIDIA's GeForce 3. The new iMacs are a little more expensive than previous models, weighing in at \$1,499 for the top-end model and \$1,199 for the midrange one, but they're available in two new psychedelic colors: "flower power" and "blue dalmatian." The entry-level version of the G4 cube was lowered \$200 in price, and those nice 22-inch Studio Display LCD monitors were dropped to \$3,000 from \$4,000. The GeForce2 MX is now standard in three of the four new Power Macs, and Apple was first to introduce the GeForce3, which Jobs called "amazing." Apple fans will get the same version of the GeForce3 as PC users will, and the card will be available as a \$600 option (roughly a \$350 upgrade from the default video card) in new Power Mac G4 computers. PC and Mac users should be able to get their hands on GeForce3 cards at roughly the same time. Apple has not yet revealed whether or not existing Power Mac owners will be able to buy the card from Apple.

Xbox name in dispute—A Florida company is claiming that they hold the right to the Xbox brand name, and is prepared to go to court with Microsoft, if necessary, to protect it. The trademark dispute could potentially hold up release of the console. Xbox Technologies is a holding company for several software businesses, and it claims it filed an application for the name with the US Patent and Trademark office in March of 1999. Microsoft filed its first application for the Xbox brand in October of that year. John Van Leeuwen, chief executive of Xbox Technologies, is quoted as saying, "There's no way that we can co-exist. We can't afford to have our business confused with games for kids. Either we find a business solution or we get into a legal battle." A spokesman for Microsoft assured Xbox fans that the trademark dispute would in no way delay the launch of the system.

Microsoft unveils Windows XP—On February 13 at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, Microsoft revealed the official moniker of the next version of Windows, previously code-named "Whistler." The OS will be called Windows XP, as in "Windows Experience." The new version of the operating system is built on the Windows 2000 engine, and represents a long-awaited unification of consumer (Windows 95, 98, ME) and professional (Windows NT, 2000) versions. Windows XP also represents drastic changes to the user interface and quite a few new built-in features, designed to make the PC easier and more friendly, and built around the idea of a PC that is always left on, can be accessed remotely, and is used by several people with their own preferences. You can find out more by visiting www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/. ■



Mach V Athlon DDR

Another fine Falcon system

COMPUTER
GAMES
STAMP OF
APPROVAL

It was almost exactly one year ago that we reviewed a custom Mach V system and found it to have the same qualities as the ones reviewed previously—superb construction quality, excellent documentation, plenty of speed and unmatched support. The only downside was the price. One year and an updated Falcon system later, none of that has changed.

Our test system is a nicely equipped 1.2 GHz Athlon with 128 MB of DDR memory. Falcon Northwest is one of the first manufacturers to offer complete systems with the faster PC2100 variety of DDR memory, instead of slightly slower PC1600 RAM. These are plugged into an ASUS A7M266 motherboard based on AMD's 761 motherboard chipset. It's a tremendously fast setup, though we recommend at least 256 MB of RAM if you build such a high-end system.

Some have argued about the relative merits of Intel's Pentium 4, and it's easy to see why. Though the Pentium 4 sports higher memory bandwidth, a faster 400 MHz bus, and even out-paces the Athlon system by 300MHz, this Mach V system is actually faster than a 1.5GHz Pentium 4. The Pentium 4 proved faster in *Quake III Team Arena* at low resolutions and in synthetic memory bandwidth tests. The Athlon edged out the "faster" Pentium 4 in just about everything else—*Unreal Tournament*, *Expendable*, *3D Mark 2000*, and even many synthetic processor tests. SciSoft Sandra benchmarks to measure CPU performance put the 1.2 GHz Athlon DDR system roughly 20% ahead of the 1.5 GHz Pentium 4. It's clear that it takes more than megahertz to make a computer fast, and Athlon systems with DDR memory are, clock-for-clock, superior to Intel's best on today's applications.

A Sound Blaster Live! Value pumps sound out to a very nice set of speakers. Our system is equipped with Klipsch's new 4.1 Promedia sound system, which differs from the excellent

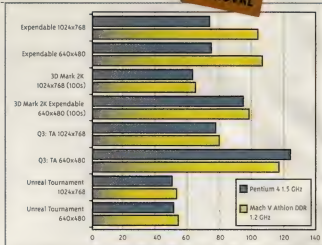
V2-400 speakers in subtle but important ways.

Essentially, the 4.1 Promedia set is the same 400-watt THX-certified powerhouse with a different right-front speaker. This speaker houses the pre-amp circuitry, which has been modified and tweaked for a somewhat cleaner sound. In addition, they've added both headphone and line-in jacks, along with a speaker cut-off button. It's a fantastic set of speakers, though it costs \$300 and definitely adds to the overall system cost.

The video card in our Mach V system is worth special mention. Though most similarly priced systems include a GeForce 2 Ultra, ours includes a somewhat slower GeForce 2 Pro. Falcon overlocks the card to a core speed of 205 MHz with a memory speed of 440 MHz, though, up from the standard 200/400. When we inquired about it, Falcon Northwest's president Kelt Reeves said, "Frankly, we push most customers cards harder than that—we can sometimes get 495-500 from the video memory." Falcon's overlocked cards are thoroughly tested and burned-in with the system, and are completely supported by the company.

A 30 GB IBM Deskstar drive provides storage, and a Sony 48X CD-ROM rounds out the package. The hard drive is zippy and reliable—IBM's Deskstar line is arguably the best you can buy. We measured real-world performance of around 35 megabytes per second on random read tests. It's a bit disappointing that it's only 30 GB, since most systems in this price range ship with 40 or 60 GB drives. The CD-ROM provides high throughput very evenly across an entire disc; we averaged around 31X speed, which is quite good for real-world tests. Game installations seem to take a lot less time with a CD drive this fast.

Though you can get a system with these components from many places, what you get uniquely from Falcon Northwest is their exquisite craftsmanship. Open the case, and it's so clean and neat you'd think it wasn't fully built yet. IDE drive cables are folded together and tied away in a method that can only be described as "geek origami." Every other cable, cord, and wire is meticulously tied away to make it easy to work on the system and promote good airflow. The CD audio cable is even routed around down by the motherboard, so you'll never yank it out by accident when



replacing your video card.

This attention to detail is evident outside the box as well. You'll get a black binder with your system that includes setup instructions, maintenance suggestions, a listing of every IRQ and DMA and what's occupying it, and even the actual Quality Control checklist used when testing your system. We've said it before and we'll say it again—this binder should be standard with every computer system on the market. Falcon Northwest backs up their product with an unmatched support program. There are even web pages devoted to how great it is to deal with Falcon's support. If they can't fix it over the phone, they'll pay to have it brought back to the factory overnight, fix it themselves, and overnight it back to you. This is the Falcon Overnight Warranty, and it's standard on all Mach V systems for a year (with optional extensions up to three years).

Once again we're presented with a Mach V system that has us sounding like a broken record: it's wicked fast, built with loving care from quality components, intricately documented, and backed by fantastic support. We're also left claiming, for the third year in a row, that the system is quite pricey—most PC manufacturers would charge \$300-400 less for a similarly spec'd system, even if you account for the killer speakers. If you care more about how your machine is built than saving an extra few hundred dollars, we heartily recommend a Mach V system. Still, the price differential should be a bit smaller. —Jason Cross

You can order Falcon Northwest machines at their website, www.falcon-nw.com, or via that wonderful old-fashioned phone at 888-325-2661.

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Falcon Northwest

MSRP \$2,795

RATING ★★★★★



This is what most Mach V systems look like, essentially. Ours had slightly newer speakers and no joystick.

THX certified maybe,
but still not so hot

ADA 890 Speakers

What kind of world are we coming to when THX certification doesn't immediately mean kick-ass speakers? Altec Lansing's ADA890 speakers just aren't quite good enough to warrant their cost, and that THX certification sticker has a few caveats, too. It looks quite similar to some of their previous offerings—two squat speakers up front with two surround satellites that can be stacked on top of those without four-channel sound cards. The subwoofer accepts 1/8" stereo plugs for front and rear connections or a digital DIN plug for either AC3 or PCM digital sound input. Altec Lansing sells an adapter for those with optical digital outputs (on a DVD player or PlayStation 2, for instance).

Though the system accepts digital input, it is not a true 5.1 Dolby Digital setup, but rather a four-channel set more typical of PC speaker rigs. That's not a downside, per se, but it's worth noting if you were planning to use the speakers for your home entertainment system. Sound quality is generally quite good, but that THX certification only applies if you use the digital connection and the digital SP/DIF connection

from your CD or DVD-ROM to your sound card. Normal four-channel analog operation is slightly noisy compared to other speakers in this price range—you'll hear an audible hiss from idle speakers or headphones at high volumes. (Speaking of headphones, you'll find a jack on the side of the left-front speaker—are speaker manufacturers finally learning?)

What you won't find, and this is critical, is a fader balance between front and rear speakers. There's a nice LCD display on the right speaker, several different mixing modes, and even a remote control (of dubious worth for a PC speaker set), but you can't adjust the front/rear or even left/right sound balance! Your sound card may have these controls, but you shouldn't have to dig into its mixer to adjust balance or fade. This would be a good set of speakers at a price of around \$200, but at \$350 they're just missing too much. —Jason Cross



The satellites in relation to a typical monitor.

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Altec Lansing

MSRP \$350

RATING ★★★★★

Wingman Strike Force 3D

At last, a three-dimensional joystick!

The Strike Force occupies an eight by ten inch rectangle, minus a few jaunty angles, which is quite reasonable for a force feedback stick. The grip provides a nice platform on which to rest the side of your hand—if it's fairly large. Among the thumb buttons are no less than two point-of-view hats, and for the left hand, the stick provides not only the usual throttle and buttons, but also a scrolling wheel such as that commonly found on mice these days. The layout of the stick is above average.

The software that ships with the stick—not the ten free levels of the expansion to *Freespace 2*, but the software which allows you to program the stick—was perfectly stable during testing, and is visually helpful. The scarcity of textual information in the joystick box is more than offset by extensive help files available. Using the software and an internet connection, it is not difficult to download profiles (a profile is a set of instructions written specifically for a particular game). More difficult is creating your own profiles from scratch, a task which will send most users rooting through the help files.

Although extensive, the help files fail to define or explain some centrally important terms and features. Terms like "centering spring," for example, which have meanings

that are almost but not quite obvious, are not explained in full despite their vital relevance. On the programming end of things, the process of creating new commands to assign to your joystick buttons and axes is not explained in terms that a brand new user will find helpful.

In testing, the stick's response felt a bit "muddy" at times; it now and then displayed pure weirdness as well, occasionally drifting to one side or shuddering unprovoked, even if the handle was clearly centered, and the stick freshly calibrated. The feedback effects, on the other hand, were always appropriate.

It's hard to argue with the Strike Force's affordable price or styling, but its feel (omitting its feedback) is a bit troubling. Bear in mind, also, that setting it up for your favorite games may require some sleuthing on your part. —Dave Perkins



The satellites in relation to a typical monitor.

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Logitech

MSRP \$89.95

RATING ★★★★★

Reviews



Thanks for years of great racing memories, Mr. Earnhardt. You'll be sorely missed.

NASCAR Racing 4

Turn left, repeat: Papyrus delivers the definitive stock car simulation

NASCAR RACING 4 IS THE LATEST IN A LONG LINE OF GREAT PRODUCTS FROM Papyrus Racing Games. For the first time since the original NASCAR Racing, the developers at Papyrus Racing Games have implemented a much more realistic physics model, the same one that was previously used to power the seminal Grand Prix Legends. While those high powered Grand Prix machines had very little downforce to keep their lithe frames pasted to the asphalt, today's 4000 pound stock cars counter that with big sticky tires and lots of spoiler. This allows us to experience a sensation that even some real Winston Cup drivers claim is close to the real thing.

The game requires beefy hardware because of this complex physics model and some incredible graphics. Papyrus simulations have always pushed the limits of modern PCs, and this one is no different. You'll need a good 3D accelerator and a fast processor. As with most racing titles, fram-

ate can be the difference between making a deft move through traffic or ending up in a pile of junk against the wall. It will take advantage of just about all the buzzwords of today's top accelerators. Use this game to demo your expensive hardware to envious friends and relatives. While low-end machines may struggle to keep up at the highest detail settings, Papyrus has smartly included many settings allowing you to adjust the graphics to playable levels on a variety of machines.

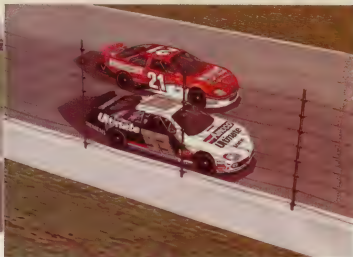
The system requirements are well within reason when you hit the track for the first time. The car interiors are beautiful and functional; however, outside the car is where the game proves its graph-

UPSIDE

Physics are amazingly realistic, graphics are so good you might think it's TV, online play is a real treat and almost perfectly implemented

DOWNSIDE

After four iterations, the AI is still weak and detracts from your enjoyment. Handling is so believable that many may find the driving too hard



Note the fine detail of the fence and the car interiors.

Let's get physical

On top of being one of the best looking games so far this year, NASCAR Racing 4 also sports the physics model to end all physics models. You can tone it down with various aids or use the super easy Arcade mode, but most hardcore racers will probably want to jump right into the fire. It's almost easy at first if you played Grand Prix Legends, since that game is actually much more difficult. If you skipped that gem, you'll find that a stock car with a full range of motion reacts differently from one that's glued to the track. Mash the accelerator and the wheels will spin and pull the car to the left because of the stagger of the tires. Once you get out on the track, you might find yourself drifting left on the straights and having to turn right to keep the car on its line. This is caused by the usual setup, which is biased to favor left turns. It's annoying, but accurate.

This game includes the ability to get airborne. Previously the cars were unable to leave the ground, resulting in collisions that didn't always seem realistic. Vehicles are now rolling and tumbling after contact—perhaps a bit too much at times. It becomes evident how much fun this adds when you try out one of the two road circuits in

THE GOODS

GENRE Racing

PUBLISHER Sierra

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-42 players; Internet, LAN

RATING





So that's how the AI doesn't always crash! Without this kind of clipping, there'd be a lot more trouble.

the game. Both Sears Point and Watkins Glen contain a lot of elevation changes. You'll find yourself popping off curbs and trying to control the settling car. The cars also have a lot of body roll, just as a real stock car does. You can minimize this in the garage by playing with springs and shocks, but often you'll find the car wanting to roll forward or back, left or right based on your speed and quick movements of the wheel.

The physics come together beautifully, from the big speedways on down to the cramped quarters of Martinsville. Once you're used to the tendencies of your car, you'll find the simulation exhilarating. It's best to spend a lot of time at each track before moving on to the next. Tweaking and tuning excessively at one track within the expansive garage

will teach you what you need to quickly move from track to track and not miss a beat.

The more things change...

Complex physics computations don't matter much if you can't get around the other cars, and that's the one thing that may reduce your enthusiasm. The AI isn't improved much over previous Papyrus outings. In fact, some very bad things can happen. Cars crash and then are not removed from the track, wreaking havoc on your testing before an event. This can render an entire twenty-minute practice useless. The problem seems more pronounced at the shorter tracks where there's less room for the AI cars to go during melees.

The game has a problem similar to one that plagued Hasbro and



Here's the look right key in action. Note the flagman. All flags are shown just like the real thing.

Monster Games' NASCAR Heat last fall. The AI just doesn't budge and races you too hard at times. Computer drivers hold their lines to a fault and humans are rarely able to be as smooth. If the AI would just back off occasionally and give you the line you already have claimed, it would provide tremendous improvement. As it stands now, you'll often end a race with a bent up racecar. Adding to this frustration is the physics model itself which demands so much from you that throwing unflinching AI cars in there really hurts.

The best way to avoid dealing with the AI is to take your racing online—the manual even seems geared toward pushing players in that direction. There's a large section devoted to sim racer's experiences with other Papyrus sims online. It's almost kind of hokey to see the publisher push it so hard, but it's true that online racing is a ton of fun. NASCAR Racing 4 makes it easy to get started with Sierra's matching scheme found right in the game's multiplayer setup. If you have a friend looking for a smaller gathering, you can play via IP connection and throw AI cars in the mix. This is the best implementation of online racing you can find using dedicated servers and it is fostering a large community around the Papyrus sims. Connection rates are crucial though, so don't expect large gatherings on your dial-up modem.

Bringing home the victory

Despite the game's foibles with single player racing against the AI, NASCAR Racing 4 still manages to make itself the definitive NASCAR simulation. In addition to the



Full-featured replay functions are a staple of the Papyrus sims.

great physics and excellent looks, the game has standout environmental audio and a throaty motor roar. It also has arm-tiring force feedback effects for those lucky enough to have a controller that supports them. The interface is somewhat subdued and overly clicky but it gets you where you need to go. One major gripe is the long load times for some of the interface screens due to 3D models of the cars being loaded. Once again, better hardware is the key to quicker response.

You can choose to test, run single races, or play the entire Championship in solo mode. Take your skills online and you'll find a large, rabid group of sim racers that expect you to take your racing seriously. Those same people might also be feeling down because of recent real world racing events, and may be less excited to drive virtual stock cars right now. Give it some time and it'll be a lot of fun again. NASCAR Racing 4 will definitely bring a smile to your face when that black number three bumps you, just before he takes the lead away from you on your last lap at Daytona. —David J. Long



A panoramic view of the Superstretch at Daytona. The game imparts a spectacular sense of being there.



Spell effects look nice and crisp.

Icewind Dale: Heart of Winter

Breathing new life into the old

Expansion packs are curious creatures. Some innovate and change the original game as much as a sequel would; others are content with merely adding more "stuff." A balance of the two is probably the best option for both players and developer; *Icewind Dale: Heart of Winter* is a first-class example of how to strike that balance.

Black Isle has introduced no new classes or major gameplay changes, but the game's structure is fastidiously refined and they have thrown a new *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition rules into the mix. Old classes get some renovations and become that much more useful. Paladins gain the *Smite Evil* special ability (1d6 + 1d6 per 3 character levels), along with immunity to fear and disease. Paladins and rangers also get access to spells at earlier

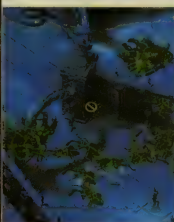
levels. Rangers gain the ability to track monsters in the area, a skill that is particularly useful for players who do not like to reload saved games. For the first time in the Infinity engine games, druids can finally advance beyond level 14. They also gain new powers such as shape shifting into elemental form and immunity to both poison and fatigue.

Thieves arguably benefit more than any other class from their trio of new skills. Evasion gives them a chance to completely avoid the affects of certain spells (such as *Fireball*), and they gain the combined *Sneak Attack/Crippling Strike* ability. You can choose to replace *Backstab* with *Sneak Attack*, a similar attack that merely requires you be behind the target. It is not as damaging as *Backstab*, but it is far easier to use and it weakens the opponent (the *Crippling Strike* part of the ability). Finally, bards have a series of new songs that boost the party's stats.

Increased screen resolution is the most significant visual change. Some old-school players may claim that graphics are merely window dressing compared to good gameplay, but having good graphics never hurts. In this case, the graphical

UPSIDE

Heart of Fury mode, better graphics that help gameplay, more "stuff"



The corpses pile high after a massive fight.

DOWNSIDE

Few new areas



The lightning on the ice in *Gloomfrost* looks spectacular, especially compared to the original.

A Frost Giant makes a cameo appearance.

improvements actually have a huge affect on the game. The increased viewing radius makes a dramatic difference in your situational awareness, which is much better at 800 by 600 than at the 640 by 480 resolution of the original. At the lower resolution you could never see enough on the screen at once—your characters could react to things that you couldn't see, as could monsters. Overall, it is much easier to manage your party in *Heart of Winter*. It's also noteworthy that the resolution can be set even higher—up to 2048 by 1536, although 800 by 600 is the highest "officially supported" resolution.

Of course nothing is perfect, so there are a few minor problems. *Heart of Winter* is too short. There are a total of six new areas, but one is a town and another is a small camp. All in all it should take you about 20 hours to play through the entire game. Thankfully, the new *Heart of Fury* mode helps immensely here. Similar to *Diablo's* Nightmare mode, this lets you play through the game with your existing team against stronger monsters, and it's really the only way to get your characters to the level 30 cap. In a way this works better than *Diablo* because the fights can become extraordinarily challenging, considering the hordes you face and

their increased levels. The only real drawback is the fact that the loot is not randomized.

Another potential pitfall is the fact that the game won't let you create characters at ninth level (the recommended level for a viable party). Instead you can only create first level characters; the game then tells you that they will surely perish should you choose to use them. There are pre-generated characters of the appropriate level on the disc, but if you don't want to use them (and you trashed your original *Icewind Dale* characters), your only real option is to play through the first game again. At least you can now play it at a higher resolution.

Even though it's a bit short, almost everything in the expansion is "new." A couple monsters return, but the vast majority of the battles are against new enemies, or at least good variations on old ones. If you enjoyed *Icewind Dale*, then you'll likely enjoy *Heart of Winter* as well. New areas await exploration and more battles are in line to be fought. The *Gloomfrost* area and the sight of the end boss are practically worth the price of admission alone. This add-on won't win over any new converts, but it will keep the old ones happy. That is what expansions are really all about.

—David Ryan Hunt

THE GOODS

GENRE Role-playing

PUBLISHER Interplay

REQUIREMENTS *Icewind Dale*

MULTIPLAYER 2-6 players; internet, LAN

RATING





Chilly Willy comes in first.

UPSIDE

The hip-hopped Woody theme song is pretty cool, repeatedly saying the name "Woody Woodpecker" while drunk and/or stoned provides hours of naughty entertainment

DOWNSIDE

Dull and uninspiring, predictable, too difficult for kids (and adults), see-through racetracks, doesn't do anything interesting with a good license



All-terrain vehicles handle like stock cars that handle like racecars...

Woody Woodpecker Racing

How to waste a license on a lame kart racing game

Blame it on the house that Mario built. The success of Nintendo's *Mario Kart* has unleashed a virtual torrent of licensed kart games on the world, few of which uphold the standard set by the brilliant original. Fortunately the PC world has been spared the majority of them, though Acclaim's *South Park Rally* deserves special mention for having the audacity to merely exist.

Woody Woodpecker Racing is a typical kart racing game, with super-deformed cartoon characters racing on wacky tracks, power ups, blah blah blah. This is a by-the-numbers design executed with little flair, which is something of a surprise considering the house that *Crash Bandicoot* built; Universal Interactive produced the game.

The game has a generous nine characters from the Walter Lantz family of cartoons (Woody, perennial crowd favorite Chilly Willy, Wally Walrus, etc.) and 16 tracks. Like most console games, you

unlock additional tracks and racers by winning races in the Quest mode. While that series requires you to win each race to progress, a more standard World Championship mode that gives you points for any top three finish.

The game does little to exploit the defined personalities of the various cartoon characters. While each has a unique attack that briefly takes out an opponent (Woody pecks them with his beak, Chilly Willy smacks them with a fish), the results are always the same—your car stops and spins in mid-air. In fact it's the same thing that occurs with most actions in the game. Hit by a Homing Pigeon or Bow & Sparrow power-up? Spin in the air. Smack someone with Knothead's retractable boxing glove? Spin in the air. Blow someone up with dynamite? Spin in the air.

There are different kart-like vehicles in the game—a stock car, race kart, all-terrain vehicle and an old junker—but as with other parts of the game there's little to nothing to distinguish them from each other. They all handle identically (and in a rather dull manner) and all power-ups produce the same effects. It's another wasted opportunity for some creative mayhem.

The game is appropriately surreal (get hotdogs to get more defenses against attacks, throw a

tomato at someone and cause them to sleep for a couple of seconds), and the tracks are definitely colorful. But the 3D engine often breaks up as you get close to the edge of the track, giving you a view of... the inside of the track. The design of the various tracks look good but are somewhat disappointing in the sense none have true shortcuts, one of the hallmarks of any arcade race game. They are also at-times too difficult to navigate; sloped areas that appear drivable usually cause you to come to a complete stop, and the collision detection is a bit wonky.

For a kart game, the actual racing action is fairly subdued and a little bit on the dull side. The cars move too slowly unless boosted by the various *F-Zero*-like accelerator rings. Perhaps this is a good thing—if the game were faster, it might actually be

harder. This is one tough game, especially when you consider its kid appeal. The catch-up logic is brutal; you're never really comfortable in the lead in any race. Computer cars always seem to find that magic bit of "oomph" at the very last second to cross the finish line ahead of you.

Aside from the more sim-like (and old-in-the-tooth) *Manic Karts* and the more recent, and surprisingly entertaining, *Lego Racing*, the PC doesn't really have a definitive kart game. *Woody Woodpecker Racing* brings little to the genre; even if you don't expect more than a few cheap thrills from a game like this, you're still better off playing... well, you're better off buying a console and playing one of the innumerable superior kart-racing games on your platform of choice. —Steve Bauman

THE GOODS

GENRE Action

PUBLISHER Konami

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II

266, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING



Chilly Willy is a publicity slut.



The Loch Ness Monster is just there for show.



What do you know... another offensive rebound.

NBA Live 2001

EA Sports blows the bunny

Over the past seven years, EA Sports' NBA Live series has had its share of ups and downs. It reached its pinnacle last season with *NBA Live 2000*. With the success of that game, PC round ball fans drooled at the thought of better AI, more franchise options, and fine-tuned gameplay for the 2001 edition. Sadly, while the latest hoop game from the sports publishing giant fixes a few gaffs and polishes a few rough edges, it also manages to remove key features and fails to fix some problems that have plagued the series since its inception.

At first they giveth, then they taketh away

Several features are absent this year, and this is particularly troubling when you consider that many of them were in last year's game. By far the most mystifying is the lack of an in-game save function. That's

right—once you fire up a game it's either play 'til the end or quit and restart. Why the developers would choose to remove this feature is anyone's guess.

The referees that patrolled the court in *Live 2000* are also missing in action. Practice mode is gone. Use of the Legends roster (great players from the past such as Bird, Chamberlain, and Jordan) is limited to season play only—you can't use them in your franchise leagues. Even the player creation model lacks the flare from seasons past—you can no longer add unique items such as armbands, high socks, eyewear, headgear, or kneepads.

Adding to the frustration is the fact that many gameplay quirks from previous *Live* offerings are still present and accounted for. Offensive rebounds are a terrible nuisance. It's not uncommon for the computer team to snatch down over 25 offensive rebounds in a single contest. This is a problem for several reasons. The CPU players know where the ball is going to go while it's in the air (or at least seem to know). It's nearly impossible for you to determine where a missed shot will bounce due to the questionable ball physics. And your computer-controlled teammates rarely jump. If you control the point guard, for example, it is astonishing just how

UPSIDE

Best looking *Live* game to date, better inside game, franchise mode adds replay value, very good game pace

DOWNSIDE

No in-game saves, scripted offensive AI, more offensive rebounds than in a sixth grade intramural game, lingering issues from previous edition remain unfixed



Here's another look at the rebound insanity—the Celtics look to have Kemp boxed out.

poor a rebounding machine a player such as Shaq is when he is not under manual control. Finally, when you press the jump button on your gamepad, your player doesn't jump directly into the air; rather he jumps about three feet forward, thus making it extremely difficult to gauge exactly where you are leaping. It makes sense that a player should drift if the gamepad is pressed in a certain direction, but the momentum car-

ries players regardless of whether you are trying to jump in that direction or not.

Echo and the Bunny Men

Players also continue to miss far too many bunny shots. Granted, you can debate that the overall shooting prowess in today's NBA isn't quite as deadly as it has been in years past, but an NBA player—any NBA player—can make a three-footer [except for perhaps Greg



But in *NBA Live 2001*, that is never enough.

THE GOODS

GENRE Sports

PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-10 players; Internet, LAN, Modem

RATING





The animation is excellent this year. Nice dunk, superfly.

Ostertag of the Utah Jazz...—ed. On the whole, the computer tends to shoot rather abysmally. It's common to see the computer finish a game with a 30-35 field goal percentage. The only way to make the computer shoot with any degree of touch is by activating the "Keep Games Close" feature, but this is an unsatisfying solution at best.

Computer defenders still have an "invisible wall" around them that makes it nearly impossible to beat them off the dribble on higher difficulty levels. Games end up following the same pattern that emerged in last year's version: pass around the perimeter, pump fake, and hope a defender leaves his feet so that you can drive into the lane with your guard or small forward.

Another issue that remains unfixed is the lack of computer-controlled fast breaks. It's a non-factor. It simply never happens. Even teams that like to "run and

gun" in real life refuse to press the issue. It's the same old story as in previous versions—the point guard, even when he has numbers, stops at the three-point line and sets up the offense.

Finally, the late game AI needs work. The computer teams show no sense of urgency whatsoever in the latter stages of a game. When its team is down six points with 23 seconds to play, the computer controlled point guard should not slowly walk the ball up the floor, take his time looking for an open man, or ponder the meaning of life. The computer needs to realize that it needs back-to-back three pointers to tie the game—and it needs them fast.

Many of these gameplay annoyances could be fixed if the design team would include AI slide bars, something akin to those found in EA's *NHL* and *Madden* titles. You should be able to adjust factors such as CPU shooting accu-

racy, rebounding, substitution patterns, and so forth. The game also lacks any kind of team strategy when simulating games. Want to set your team to run fast breaks? Want to instruct your team to press a certain percentage of the time? Want to stress the inside game or set sub patterns? You can't. All you do is set your lineup and let 'er rip.

sical enough to satisfy. It's nowhere nearly as enjoyable as John Motson's commentary in EA's *FIFA* series, but it's not too bad.

During the game's development process, EA Sports stressed that the main focus this year would be on the inside game. While the players remain a bit too stiff, several new moves provide help to the big men. Jump hooks,



Jump hooks are common this year. Big Daddy for two!

All hope is not lost

While it's impossible to ignore the flaws, it's also evident that several key areas of the game have seen significant improvement. Aside from the new spiffy graphics (which look fabulous), the overall pacing of the game is noticeably enhanced. In order to get realistic scores, you need to play on the full 12-minute quarters. This is a first in computer basketball. The computer passes the ball effectively, works the shot clock, and even walks the ball up the floor rather than racing up the court each and every possession. The only problem with the new pacing is the aforementioned missing save game feature. A full game takes over an hour to play and without the ability to save a game in progress it can be a liability if you need to cut things short. Speaking of game speed, the monotony of waiting for the computer to shoot free throws is a thing of the past. The CPU takes very little time attempting foul shots; this speeds up the action considerably.

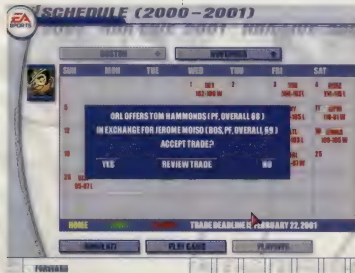
A player's jumping ability is now better grounded in reality; unathletic players no longer jump out of the gym. The play by play is also more varied, and while it starts to get repetitive after a few games, it's still whim-

fade away jumpers, and spin moves are nice additions that help the center play with his back to the basket more effectively than ever before. There is also an "up and under" move, but it's fairly difficult to pull off.

The game's franchise mode is a bit better this year. You can survey trade offers rather than having to accept or reject trades without first studying your roster. It's still a bummer that you can't view stats from simulated games (even your own team's games) or trade draft picks, but the depth of the rookie draft adds an enormous amount of replay value and helps your team takes on new shape as seasons roll by. It would be nice if franchise mode had such perks as a Hall of Fame, stat records for retired players, and the like. Maybe next year.

A great game for Live 99 owners

NBA Live 2001 isn't a bad game. In fact, if you skipped last year's version you'll probably want to check it out. For longtime fans of the series there simply isn't enough new stuff to get excited about, however, and for every improvement there are missing features and lingering problems that drag the game down. —William Abner



You can review trade offers this year.



Hoisting the mainsail on the War of 1812.

Age of Sail II

Proving that bugs can sink even mighty tall ships

John Masefield once wrote that all a good sailor needs is "a tall ship and a star to steer her by." That was all well and good when the British poet laureate included those famous (thank you, Captain Kirk) lines in the opening stanza of "Sea Fever" way back in 1900. Today, however, we need a little more than that, especially if you're using TalonSoft's Age of Sail II to recapture the romantic era of Horatio Hornblower.

Topping the request list for today's computerized sailor? Patches and patience. Age of Sail II is infested with more bugs than the average swabbie's bunk, circa 1812. And as good as the basic game idea is—and it is, though it damn well should be good considering that it's essentially the same as its 1997 predecessor—the entire experience is crippled by an obtuse interface and abysmal documentation. All in all, this is one of the most unstable and frustratingly erratic games to anchor in software stores in quite some time.

THE GOODS

GENRE Strategy

PUBLISHER TalonSoft

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem, serial

RATING



"I must go down to the seas again"

Anyone who fights through the defects will see that Age of Sail II could have been an inviting depiction of the classic seafaring era between 1775 and 1820 (best known today in the fiction of C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brien). All the basic ingredients are certainly there. More than a hundred historical episodes can be played in solo mode. You can replay famed encounters like the Battle of Trafalgar, where Admiral Horatio Nelson crushed the French and ensured British naval supremacy over the globe for the following century, and the Battle of the Nile, where Nelson all but stranded Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in the land of the pharaohs.

You can also stage just about every other naval battle recorded during the period. Take the helm of Old Ironsides herself, U.S.S. Constitution, in a series of battles against the Brits, guide the Wasp through a number of hard-fought War of 1812 clashes, stave off a British assault on a French convoy of grain—the possibilities here are just about limitless. There are also four interesting hypothetical scenarios, in case the history books aren't enough.

Six separate campaigns offer an additional 50 missions, representing all of the significant wars and seafaring nations of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, though

UPSIDE

Cameplay depth and the large number of missions will intrigue C.S. Forester fans



No wonder the French lost at Grenada—they were moving at six frames per second!

DOWNSIDE

All the bugs and other design gaffes will encourage unhealthy fantasies about forcing the development team to walk the plank



Preparing to board a defeated British vessel.

How many ships would you have earned if you hadn't surrendered in your last campaign mission?

the focus is on the United States and Britain. If you want to stick to the mainstream, you can take charge of either the British or the American fleets during the War of 1812, or sign up with Admiral Nelson and fight the French and Spanish. If you desire something a little more obscure, join the Russian navy and take on the Ottoman Turks for control of the Black Sea.

Campaign play is a touch on the bland side, though. Most of the missions are self-contained, with no real connecting elements to make them meaningful even as an episodic story. You can gain prestige, manage an entire fleet, buy new vessels, and earn gifts from the crew, money, and promotions, but the campaigns never seem like much more than groups of scenarios thrown together and given a title. You can even progress by losing.

"Where the wind's like a whetted knife"

All of the scenarios in the world are meaningless if you can't figure out how to play them. Which is a real problem in Age of Sail II, since this fairly complex simulation comes with no in-game tutorial and a manual more suitable for a game like Pac Man. How to captain more than 1,200 massive warships in dozens of different configurations through over 150 disparate missions is summed up in

just 20 pages of text (that's not a misprint. That's two-zero. Twenty). This brochure is a flimsy waste of paper that's mostly just an ad for the strategy guide, much like the blurb that's currently splashed all over the game's official website.

All sorts of important information is glossed over, and there are no direct instructions on how to accomplish even basic and crucial tasks such as boarding a surrendered vessel. The manual defines and explains the interface's numerous buttons, but without necessary guidance about what needs to be done when, you'll be flailing about in the water for hours after first installing the game. Convincing an enemy ship to surrender in the early stages of some campaigns is often as easy as firing a single round. Figuring out how to send over a boarding party and then how to



Defending Copenhagen with a spastic mouse cursor.



Is there anything as majestic as a tall ship under full sail?

undo the grapple holding the vessels together requires a lot more trial and error.

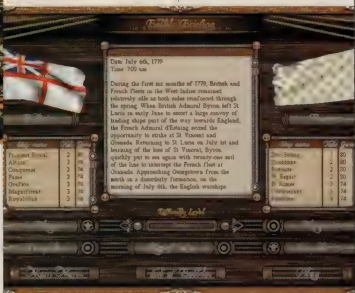
Age of Sail II features the most complete suite of bugs this side of an entomology lab, including everything from corrupted save game data to broken order screens. The release version of this game is an utter disaster. Version 1.00 is jammed with enough glitches to convince even the most eager desktop admiral that this vessel left port too soon. TalonSoft apparently agrees—an official patch with more than two dozen fixes, both major and

load a single battle or a campaign scenario. Drops to the desktop accompanied by the grim words "Abnormal Program Termination" are so depressingly common that the game should be subtitled "Runtime Error!" A full Windows reboot is often required to properly restart the game. Even worse, these crashes can corrupt save data and end your campaign endeavors even quicker than a fleet of British 74s.

Even when the game starts properly, it doesn't run very well. Missions can sometimes begin with a screen that looks like a photo-

the cursor to skip around the screen. Load up "Battle Off Grenada" or "Battle of Copenhagen" and take a look for yourself. Formation commands don't work at all. Direct orders given this way are typically ignored—or perhaps followed in

hurt, either. The game's 3D engine does an excellent job of bringing these beautiful ships to life, complete with billowing sails, realistic damage, and even tiny little crewmen that run fore and aft. The artists have also done a good job with the battle maps, adding land



Did the Seven Years' War ever really end?

some strange logical way that only a CPU can understand. Either way, you're best off clicking on each vessel and assigning individual orders. Needless to say, this can make fleet combat rather tiresome.

Audio clipping is a constant annoyance. The atmospheric swell of the waves reverbs through all of the menu screens like some sort of special effect from a rave. Flags are often incorrect. You can begin a scenario with an American vessel that's oddly flying the British ensign from its stern in the close-up screen.

"When the long trick's over"

As you might well suspect, the game isn't good enough to warrant enduring so many hassles... though perhaps it's closer than it should be. The designers at Akella obviously know and love the historical period in question, and have a lent an air of authenticity to the vessels and events that is truly inspiring. This game leaves you feeling that you've actually learned something (and not only about all the colorful and assorted ways that your computer can crash), and maybe even experienced a little bit of the tension of life on the high seas some two centuries ago.

Good presentation values don't

features and coastal settlements and fortresses. Audio effects don't enhance play nearly as much. There's little here aside from a canned orchestral soundtrack that sounds like a reject from a Bounty and the pop of cannon fire. Shouted orders during battle would have upped the drama immeasurably.

Age of Sail II is yet another game that could have greatly benefited from some extra time development time. Akella and TalonSoft seemingly shipped it too soon, perhaps rushing it out the door to take advantage of the slowest PC gaming season of the year. If that tactic is effective at the cash register, they can thank the February blahs, not the merit of the game itself.

While the basic concept remains a winner, nearly every other aspect of the game needs some serious work. A lot of bugs need to be ironed out. The interface could be more intuitive and more mouse-friendly. And the lack of a real manual is simply insulting to anyone that paid \$50 for the game. Temper your romantic feelings for the era of tall ships and sailing by the stars with the knowledge that those beautiful vessels were also the breeding ground of scurvy and rats.

—Brett Todd



Uh, somebody's not having a good day.

minor, hit the web at approximately the same time that the game hit stores.

Instability is the most serious out-of-the-box issue. Occasionally, the game refuses to

graphic negative and the positions of the sea and sky reversed. A few of the historical missions are virtually unplayable because of intense screen slowdown that drops the framerate to a crawl and causes

Kingdom Under Fire

G.O.D.'s melting pot melts down

Maybe originality is overrated. Certainly there isn't a whole lot that's very new in some of the most praised and most popular games of the last year. If you're not going to be original, however, you at least have to be good. Unfortunately this new real-time strategy/role-playing hybrid from Korean developer Phantagram isn't. *Kingdom Under Fire* doesn't make any pretense of

revolves around that hoary old fantasy convention of a "once strife-torn land that had known 100 years of peace but is now once again facing invasion by the forces of darkness." If that sounds clichéd, then the hackneyed and often just plain goofy names of many of the characters—"Moonlight," the "Mysterious Knight," and an ultimate villain named "Rick Blood"—are enough



The name of that sword says all you need to know about the game's originality.

being original; it shamelessly copies two Blizzard classics, *WarCraft II* and *Diablo*. The problem is that it doesn't copy from either classic particularly well, and the result is a flat, lifeless experience that quickly becomes more of a chore than a pleasure.

Kingdom Under Fire's story

to make you think that a committee assembled the entire affair from off-the-shelf parts.

The game tells this story in two campaigns, one each for the forces of good and evil. Each campaign consists of 13 missions; ten missions are *WarCraft II*-style real-time strategy affairs and the other three are *Diablo*-esque dungeon crawls. Although you will control multiple heroes in the game's various missions, the overall campaign follows the exploits of a single hero (the hero for the good campaign, Curian, looks like a buff young Elvis but sounds like Doogie Howser) that gains experience and abilities with every successfully completed mission.

The 2D graphics of these missions

UPSIDE

It does both *WarCraft II* and *Diablo*



Yep, it's the old "prove yourself worthy" quest.

are badly dated by today's standards, but the frustrating gameplay is far worse. The aggressive unit AI can't be adjusted, and heroes die all too easily no matter how powerful. Combine that with the game's most glaring omission—the lack of the ability to save a mission in progress—and you have a formula for the kind of frustration that makes you want to rip the CD out of the drive and see whether it does better in the microwave. There's nothing like playing through a two-hour mission only to blow the whole thing when your hero decides to wander into a horde of Orcs when you're not looking.

The *Diablo*-esque dungeon crawls provide a break from the strategic frustrations by providing new frustrations of their own. The view is fixed tightly on the main hero (oddly, the resolution of the dungeon crawls is fixed at a lower resolution than the real-time strategy missions), which can be a problem if another hero wanders off-screen. As with the strategic scenarios, there are no in-mission

DOWNSIDE

It doesn't do either very well



The *Diablo*-esque missions have some nice effects, but not much action.

saves. Worst of all, the role-playing missions play a lot like *Diablo* minus the fun. Their sparse look and even sparser monster populations simply lack the visceral feel of their muse.

Kingdom Under Fire also provides a skirmish game against a single computer opponent and multiplayer action against up to seven human opponents via LAN or on G.O.D.'s free Warnet servers. Several visits to Warnet found the lobby empty, however, and even if you manage to find opponents the multiplayer and skirmish modes aren't that interesting. Aside from the heroes the game is a rather retro affair, and it simply isn't all that exciting; certainly far less so than the experience offered by much more polished multiplayer games such as *StarCraft*.

The biggest problem with *Kingdom Under Fire* is that neither the real-time strategy nor the role-playing part of the game is very good, and the whole isn't any better than the sum of its parts.

—Jason Levine



Without in-mission saves, you'll fear the worst too

THE GOODS

GENRE Real-time Strategy

PUBLISHER G.O.D.

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200 MMX, 64 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; internet, LAN

RATING





"Fire, then duck and cover" is the theme of the day here.

In Cold Blood

Time to spy a good adventure

Adventure games aren't dead—they just retired to Europe. Aside from LucasArts' semi-regional contributions to classically minded third-person adventure fans, few developers even bother with the genre anymore. UK's Revolution software has been steadily pumping out quality adventures for quite a few years now, however; you might remember them for their *Broken Sword* series or the cyberpunkish *Beneath a Steel Sky*. Revolution's latest game, *In Cold Blood*, is a stylish, well-written, and good-looking adventure game that casts you as British MI6 agent John Cord, fighting to save the world in a dark, near-future landscape of intrigue and espionage.

The game opens ominously, with Cord captured. Beaten and drugged at the hands of a Russian agent, our stalwart hero is forced to recount his missions deep into Russian territory, and thus the game plays out in flashbacks. Divided into nine missions, *In Cold*

Blood moves at a fairly intense pace for an adventure game without quite wandering into the realm of action/adventure.

In the first mission, Cord is sent into a Russian CIA mine to locate a missing CIA agent; the plot thickens from there. The game presents a world where the Cold War is back again, but this time it's between the Americans and Chinese. At stake is a strange new energy source, the lives of untold innocents, and of course, Cord's general sense of well being.

Much like recent LucasArts' adventures, you won't find any point-and-click-style control. Instead you control Cord directly with either your keyboard or a gamepad. Generally it is pretty easy to get around, but there are a few problems. For one, it's easy to get stuck on obstacles and end up turned around, particularly when running. There are also occasional scenery glitches in which you'll see enemies walking through walls or, worse, places where Cord will get stuck.

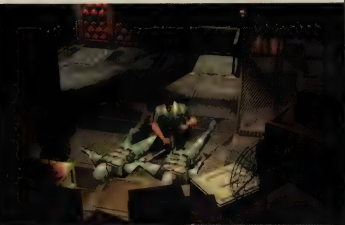
To help you along, Cord's head will turn to look at things, indicating interaction possibilities. It's a neat idea (and another LucasArts influence), but it lacks precision. Since Cord will interact with whatever person he's looking at, no matter how far away that person is, you'll occasionally end up accidentally talking to someone from across the room when you merely

UPSIDE

An excellent adventure game with challenging and generally logical puzzles, excellent graphics and sound, and a solid, involving story

DOWNSIDE

Some control issues, not enough video options, a lot of back and forth puzzles



Always search the bodies of the dead to see what you can find.

Here you get to find out just how sadistic you really are.

Cord checks out the office of his tormentor.

In some cases, John must blend in with the environment and act like someone else.

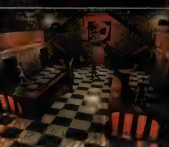
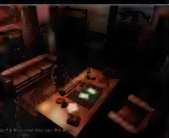
meant to hit a nearby switch.

Cord is pretty spunky for the average puzzle-laden adventure hero. Not only can he walk, run, and manipulate the many items he finds, he has combat abilities as well. At times, violence will prove to be your best solution, and you'll either have to fire your pistol to down enemy guards, or quietly walk up behind them and take them out with a quick jab to the neck. The balance is perfect, at least if you prefer puzzles and adventure to gunplay; this isn't a *Resident Evil* clone by any means. Some quick reflexes may be needed, but the addition of gunplay shouldn't be a deterrent for adventure purists.

Generally, the missions are tough, but like most Revolution games, the puzzles maintain a sense of order and logic. You'll often have to run back and forth between some areas in the game, however—talking to one person, then investigating something or finding an object, then going back again.

The pre-rendered 3D backdrops are detailed and sharp looking, the characters are very well animated, and the game has a crisp and attractive look to it. The game doesn't seem to use 3D acceleration either, nor does it need it.

The audio work is great as well. A dramatic score complements the action, and the voice acting is exceptional—especially the voice



of Cord himself, who displays the flair and wit of James Bond without coming across as a clone. Sound effects and ambient noises are also excellent, and play a key role in the game. Nearby enemies will actually be able to hear and respond to gunshots and alarms. Consequently, being quiet and sneaky is generally the preferred way to get around.

Good adventure games are hard to find but *In Cold Blood* certainly qualifies. Its mix of classic adventure-style gameplay, intriguing storyline, logical puzzles and just a touch of action make it a top-notch choice for fans of thought-inducing gameplay. —Jason D'Aprile

THE GOODS

GENRE Adventure

PUBLISHER DreamCatcher Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32 MB RAM

RATING None

★★★★☆





UPSIDE
Impressive terrain rendering engine

DOWNSIDE
Limited controls, stiff animation, minimal goals

Times like these you want a reliable helmet.

Caution: lake ahead, surfing physics out.

Soul Ride

A Zen reason to play this game: "because it's installed"

When mountain climbers are asked why they climb a mountain, the standard answer—"because it's there"—indicates the weird Zen of attempting steep things. *Soul Ride* presumes a similar answer for the question of why you'd ride a fiberglass board down the same mountain. The game is a very Zen affair with little regard for the usual trappings that accompany most snowboarding games. It has only one rider with one board, there are no elaborate courses with hidden shortcuts, you can perform no complex animated stunts, and there is very little by way of goals. Instead, it's just you and the mountain and not a whole lot of game.

There are about a dozen, timed courses (actually, they're just slopes with a finish line at the bottom) that you'll have to unlock sequentially. This is barely enough for a few hours' diversion. Some players might enjoy the Zen of trying to beat their high scores

"because they're there;" otherwise there's little incentive to run a course again after you've beat it.

The bulk of *Soul Ride* is the pair of mountain ranges in the box, one from California and one from New Hampshire. Considering that the game plays like a budget title, the terrain is really impressive. This isn't just a slope with textures on it—it's the honest-to-goodness terrain with gullies, rises, sudden

like any other. Also, curiously enough, the game imposes a three-wreck limit even when you're just exploring. Wipe out three times and you have to start over at the beginning. The reset feature is pretty clever, however. If you crash, the game rewinds itself as if you were backing up several seconds of videotape. Then it lets you try again from shortly before your wipeout.

Slingshot, the developer, is using the game to hawk a snowboarding controller called The Catapult. It sits on the floor. You stand on it and wiggle. And hope that no one is looking. To its credit, the controls emphasize how precarious it is to stay upright on a snowboard, particularly as you build up speed. Since you have to carefully gauge how quickly you turn to keep from falling over, you have to anticipate the terrain in front of you. Unlike most arcade snowboarding games, *Soul Ride* is not so much about thinking on your feet as planning ahead. The controls make stunts prohibitively difficult, however. Getting airborne is easy, but successfully landing takes a lot of practice. The stunts themselves are organic—instead of the typical "press a button, watch a scripted animation" routine, you move the board around manually. That sounds promising, but since the controls are so limited, these stunts aren't very spectacular. Throw in some

sadly stiff character animation, perfunctory snow effects, and dull cosmetic weather and lighting, and suddenly there's not much to look at except for the terrain.

Unlike most bad games, *Soul Ride* really isn't terribly offensive. It's almost as if someone created a wonderful engine for rendering realistic mountain terrain and then decided it would be a shame not to slap a game on top of it. Sizing up the competition on the PC (such as Head Games' horrible *Extreme Wintersports*), a snowboarding game must have seemed like a good idea. Once you've finished the timed courses, however, there's really nothing to justify sliding down these well-rendered mountains. A sense of freedom is all fine and well, but is it reason enough to play this game? Probably not. Sometimes "because it's there" just doesn't cut it. —Tom Chick



Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

drop-offs, jagged rocks, trees and even small lakes. Hundreds of square miles of mountain ranges are laid out in fine detail. You can designate any place as a drop off point and just start snowboarding. This sort of freedom is certainly commendable, but it's somewhat pointless. Although the game lets you explore, there's not much reason to explore. Sure, the detailed terrain is nice, but one side of Mammoth Mountain looks much



Purpled mountain's majesty.

THE GOODS

GENRE Extremely underwhelming) Sports

PUBLISHER On Deck Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING



UPSIDE

A chance to focus on the magical side of Heroes

DOWNSIDE

But you're forced to play that way, and it can get dull

Heroes Chronicles: Masters of the Elements

Once again it's time for Tarnum to journey into battle, this time against the vicious Elemental Lords. They seek to take the world as their own, and Tarnum must master all forms of magic in order to stop them. Throughout his training he must fight his hatred for magic in order to learn the skills he needs to defeat the Elemental Lords. With the powers of magic and the Conflux at his hand, Tarnum will wage war in the each of the Elemental Planes.

Masters of the Elements is the third installment in the *Heroes Chronicles* series, and is also the least compelling. It's not a bad game, but compared with the rest of the *Heroes of Might and Magic* line it weighs in a bit on the dull side. This is primarily thanks to the level design, a feature that has been superb in the other *Chronicles* games. The problem is that you are always fighting elementals. When you're

in the Fire Plane there are literally thousands of fire elementals to kill, and almost every fight is identical. One time you may face a dozen while another battle has throngs, but it just feels like more of the same. Your character's skills are restricted, so Tarnum ends up with expert in all the magic related skills. This means you can't get a lot of the good skills, such as logistics and offense, but with the campaign spell book carryover it ends up balancing out. He also has the ability to upgrade Magi to Enchanters. Even at the start of each mission it is incredibly easy to defeat large groups of elementals, because they are too slow and too defenseless against your spell arsenal.

If you're interested in picking up a *Chronicles* title, this is probably the last one you'll want. While it's not a bad game, why start with the worst of the bunch?
—David Ryan Hunt



The burning question is, of course, what artifacts will this poor hero bequeath unto me?

UPSIDE

All of the high-level expansion dragons play a role

DOWNSIDE

The start of the campaign is a bit slow

Heroes Chronicles: Clash of the Dragons

For Tarnum the Immortal Hero, living among humans was not a possibility. Their lives were simply too short for the company of an immortal. So he left to live with the dragons and elves, and the Barbarian Tyrant became Tarnum Dragonfriend. When the good dragons disappeared, Tarnum was elected to lead the search to find them. He would discover that the evil dragon queen Mutare now controls the dragons, and Tarnum must fight to free the good dragons.

This last installment of the *Heroes Chronicles* series sports a simple story and lacks the initial intrigue of the earlier titles (such as *Conquest of the Underworld*), yet it improves as you get further into the game. The early missions start off slowly, and you are restricted to lower level units. Tarnum's sharpshooter ability also makes winning those missions a breeze.

The second half of the game is where the fun really starts. All of the high level dragons (Faerie, Rust, Crystal and Azure) are available to purchase from dwellings spread throughout the maps. The only problem is that the computer starts with its own supply of these powerful dragons, and you must destroy these forces to gain control of the dwellings. It's an entertaining challenge, especially when you run into anti-magic garrisons guarded by

Azure Dragons.

Despite being the last retail game in the series, it does not bring the overall story arc to a true conclusion. There are two additional *Chronicles* available for download (*The World Tree* and *The Fiery Moon*) from 3DO if you own two or three of the retail games. It's a nice offer, but one that supposedly expired late January (although the additional *Chronicles* are still available for download at the time of this writing).

Clash of the Dragons shares the faults of its predecessors, primarily the clunky storytelling method. In order to see the entire plot each mission, it's necessary to continue playing for a month or two after you have won each scenario. This doesn't really detract from the fun—it just seems a bit clumsy. If you're interested in the *Chronicles* series, *Clash of the Dragons* provides the best gameplay but *Conquest of the Underworld* delivers the best plot. —David Ryan Hunt

THE GOODS

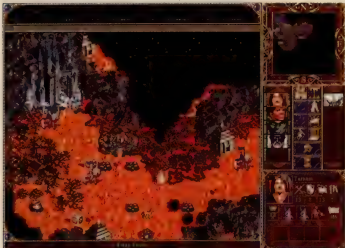
GENRE Turn-based Strategy

PUBLISHER 3DO

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING



You can probably guess what you'll be fighting on this map.

THE GOODS

GENRE Turn-based Strategy

PUBLISHER 3DO

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING



Every map is filled with elemental-producing dwellings, such as these Water Elemental producers.



Kidnapped by Bolok.

Stupid Invaders

Farts and fuzzy dice

Can we say "fart"? Yes? Excellent, as there is no way to tell you about *Stupid Invaders* without it. How about "poop"? Good. And "phallic"? Oh yeah. This game panders to those who truly appreciate the lowest of low-brow humor. If *South Park*, *Ren and Stimpy*, and the like offend you, then it's probably best to avoid this title.

Five aliens of various colors, shapes, and sizes (with notably limited intelligence) were on their way from Sam's Club to their home planet when their space ship, complete with fuzzy dice, turned back into a pumpkin. They crash landed on our planet, and took up residence in an abandoned house. Clueless, they believed that they would be able to fix the ship within a matter of days. Several years later, they were still putting finishing touches on the former pumpkin. An evil scientist, Dr. Sakarine, got wind of their existence. He is a 4'3" escapee from an

Underdog rerun, and is headquartered in Area 52, the other white lab. Coincidentally, he also collects space aliens for biological experiments.

The good doctor gathers together several million dollars in a suitcase and summons his henchman Bolok, (aptly named after much of the game's imagery). Whipping out a cleaver, he hacks the suitcase in half, offering half to Bolok, and promising him the other half upon delivery of the aliens and their ship. Bolok hunts the hapless critters down, and produces a gun that turns them all into a block of ice. Not only are they frozen, but also the ice block is attached via various hoses and tubes to a fart machine that pipes all sorts of different and melodious farts into their environment at the flick of a lever. The fun is only beginning.

Bud, the tall, orange, and probably most endearing alien escapes Bolok's attack, and the game opens with him locked in the first of seemingly thousands of WCs throughout the land. Here a toilet, there a toilet, everywhere a toilet-toilet. Bud spends most of his time scratching his butt and, er, adjusting himself, and when he finds his glacially impaired friends, his eyes pop out of his smiling face. He announces with great joy, "Don't panic guys, I've seen this all before in a Chuck Norris (pronounced 'Noreece')

UPSIDE

Brilliant graphics, a real visual treat, gives lowbrow a good name (for a few moments)

DOWNSIDE

Riddled with bugs, glitches, awkward navigation, interminable node loads, and too many toilets



This bear is in many cupboards throughout the game.

film. In the end, everyone who's frozen in the ice dies a horrible death in a huge bonfire!"

Dramatis personae and minimalist dialogue

You begin as Bud, but eventually play as all five of the aliens as the story progresses. Etno is the intellectual leader of the group. Long and purple, he was initially hired for the part of "sausage," but at various angles it is evident that he is auditioning for the role of "dildo." Stereo is the two-headed red guy, and perhaps has the least defined personality. His charm lies in the fact that one head is often deeply engrossed in something

while the other head is busy doing something else. Gorgious is the large blue ape-like creature with one huge tooth—he is the least genteel of the bunch, and is extremely protective of the little green guy, Candy.

Candy is by far the most bizarre character. He is a cross-dresser who indicates that he is in the market for gender alteration surgery, and is the target of every male predator in a bunny suit he comes upon (please excuse that). In an attempt to escape from one such predator, he tiptoes to the door and tries to leave. The nine-foot-tall guy in the pink bunny suit with the bot-



Pumping farts into ice cubes.

THE GOODS

GENRE Adventure

PUBLISHER ubi Soft

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 16 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING 3 stars





Candy ponders fine art.



Candy collects cow poop...right from the source.

tom cut out stops him:

Predator: [Big husky voice]
"Where ya going, honey?"

Candy: [Small whiny voice]
"Uh...? Out for cigarettes?"

Predator: "You don't need cigarettes, I gotcha great big Cuban cigar, hand rolled on the thighs of virgins, right here."

The dialogue is rather sparse, but anyone who is annoyed by listening to ten minute speeches of exposition will be thrilled that most of the game involves active participation. As stated earlier, the humorous dialogue is extremely sophomoric, but this will appeal to both those whose sophisticated side is undeveloped, or to those whose sophisticated side goes away completely when subjected to toilets, billions of phallic symbols, and cow poop.

It really wants to grow on you, but...

The game has a lot going for it, with over 500 locations, movie-like cinematics, esoterically humorous dialogue, an interesting, ambient score including an extremely tacky (on purpose) elevator-music arrangement of La Marseillaise. The cartoon graphics are nothing less than brilliant, colorful and bold, with a surprise around every corner. *Stupid Invaders* tries very, very hard to make you like it—kind of like a sad wide-eyed puppy—but then all too often, it pees on the floor.

First of all, the full install is 2GB of data over four disks. If you want to wait onsets for the install, and if you indeed even have 2GB free, then by all means choose the full install. The normal install results in some of the slowest in-game transitions ever. Each loca-

tion has various nodes among which you must navigate, usually more than once or twice or three times to accomplish the necessary tasks in that location. The nodes are small, and each transition can take up to five or six seconds to complete. What should be a seamless walk from one end of the room to the other becomes a cumbersome step-wait-step-wait-step-wait ordeal.

There are graphics glitches in various places that take you from a fully rendered scene into a palette-shifted scene of "static-filled mush," and one location appears to be half rendered as you walk through it. The navigation tags indicate "This way," and "Back," but they are not consistent. On occasion, you can click on a navigation tag, but it takes you nowhere at all.

The game crashes to Windows—often, and with no warning whatsoever—on a variety of machines. Although the game itself is very linear, there are necessary disk swaps at the most inappropriate moments, most notably in the final few moments of the game. You'll be able to taste the conclusion, and then you'll see "Insert Disk 2." You cannot return from the "Insert Disk" moments, even if you want to restore a previous game. You must insert the new disk, choose to load a game, and then insert the initial disk again.

The little puzzle that didn't belong

For the most part, the puzzles are well integrated, but there are quite a few non-intuitive ones. Two are downright outrageous enough to merit dishonorable mention, but for different rea-



Now that's a-maze-ing.

sons. One involves a maze the size of Montana, which requires that you navigate it hopelessly for longer than is really necessary. All of a sudden a snail arrives to save you, and the resulting 15-minute (well... maybe not that long, but it seems that way) ride on its back to exit the maze is completely interminable. The joke is that the snail—who sped up to you like a rocket and who warns you that the ride might be too speedy for you—is, um, slow. All right, point taken in one minute, maybe two.

The other is, gulp, a locked door behind a game of *Simon*—a long sequence of *Simon*, during which every mouse click does make piece of the game board light up...eventually. Most designers avoid the tired door puzzle paradigm these days; at least this game doesn't make you face it

more than once.

Finally, the "Game Over" moment is far too random, without foreshadow. Killing you for going into a room without any warning whatsoever is simply inappropriate.

If toilet humor is your thing

Okay, there are too many bathrooms, too much farting, too much phallic art, and too much double entendre wannabe content for the sophisticated gamer. Luckily, the number of players who have retained a passion for the stupid and silly is probably great enough to supply a good audience for *Stupid Invaders*. If there is a patch by the time you read this, and you're the type who pegs the name Peter Johnson as a redundancy, then you'll probably get a kick out of it. —Cindy Yans



UPSIDE

This Entrepreneur remake is just as elegant as it ever was and this time around it's a little deeper

DOWNSIDE

The interface hasn't come very far



[left] Forget war—business is hell.

[above] There's plenty of parking available at the office.

The Corporate Machine

"If you need a friend, get a dog."

You make cars. *The Corporate Machine* can also be played with aircraft, colas, or computers, but for now let's assume you make high performance sports cars with Ultra Engines. Most of the world loves your cars. You're raking the money in and watching the game map turn your color, one region at a time. Just as you think you're going to win, something starts to crumble. Your competitor starts eating the guts out of one of your continents. To your horror, you discover he's done something you didn't do. Perhaps he's developed a barrage of powerful TV commercials or he's engineered a more reliable car that leaves your high performance car in the dust.

You try to retol, you try to

adapt, you make cutbacks to deal with the loss of sales, you lower prices, your incomes dwindle, you have to pull your advertising, you can't support all your workers, you close a factory, your income plummets, the whole house of cards collapses. You know exactly why. You remember clearly the crossroads where you took a wrong turn and next time you'll know what to do. *The Corporate Machine* teaches you things when you lose.

Stardock's latest title is basically an upgrade of their 1997 game *Entrepreneur*, a real-time strategy game that supposes business as a form of warfare. This time around the graphics are a bit better and the interface is just as bad as it used to be, but the significant changes are subtle and far-reaching. There's an R&D tech tree that forces you to make some difficult decisions about what kind of product you're going to make. There are more structures that you can build, and some have a direct effect on the map. Perhaps most importantly, there's lots of new information to help you keep track of what's going on. Part of *Entrepreneur*'s problem was that it was driven by fuzzy math running

under the hood. In *The Corporate Machine*, you aren't left out of the loop—Stardock has clearly made a choice to lay the mechanics bare so it's easier to tell what's happening and why it's happening.

All this data isn't very well organized, however. The game is a mishmash of graphs, mutually exclusive displays, and map filters. The interface would have benefited from more right click functionality and hot keys, which are both almost entirely absent. Instead, it's driven almost exclusively by buttons along the edges of the screen, placed so that you'll inadvertently scroll your view any time you want to check something. The map sloshes around like a board balanced on a volleyball. It's enough to make a would-be business tycoon seasick. Since most of the maps are fictional places, the message text is almost impossible to relate to the playing field. How are you supposed to react to messages about "Retaslavia", "Zone 5", or "East Westchester"? Short of clicking on every single territory, you'll get no help. Hopefully, Stardock will release more maps of real world places: it's easier to make sense of a message that your competitor has built a new site in Germany than one in which he builds a new site in "Zor" or "Territory B-19."

The game is good enough that it could weather a much worse interface. It's a streamlined elegant design that really "gets it." The "it" in question is mainly pac-

ing, the often overlooked art of constantly giving you something new to keep you interested. It has the same one-more-turn quality that made *Civilization* so compelling. There's a definite groove here that whiles away the time with a combination of careful planning, second-guessing, luck, unexpected twists, and hard choices. The games are relatively short and fast, made lively with playable cards that are like spells you can cast on your opponents. Although the theme is business, there's a definite and sometimes humorous sense of war and conquest as you convert regions to your particular company and snatch sales out from under your competitors. Since it's played in real time (with variable speed and a pause-and-play feature), the action is smooth and fluid. Stardock is well known for creating challenging AI; this game is no exception. Be prepared to lose a few games as you learn the ropes. Not to mention a few after you've learned them.

With a better interface and a more explicit manual, *The Corporate Machine* would be one of those thoughtfully rare and accessible strategy games that you can't tear yourself away from. As it is, it's just one of those thoughtfully rare strategy games that you can't tear yourself away from. And with further free updates and add-ons from Stardock likely, buyer beware—it's got the kind of legs that can really run away with your time. —Tom Chick

THE GOODS

GENRE Strategy

PUBLISHER Stardock Systems, Inc.

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 100, 16 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; internet

RATING



No Escape

The search for a way to be violent without being violent continues

No Escape introduces its eight starring characters by way of eight cut scenes that are high on production value and low on wit. The rest of the game pretty much follows suit. The black guy has a huge Afro, the Asian is a ninja, and the cowboy chews a match. Juxtaposed with the game's non-violent theme (it plays a bit like a non-violent version of *Unreal Tournament*... instead of knocking limbs off of your opponents, you knock cash out of their pockets) are cut scenes that show the policewoman character pumping bullets into the chests of criminals and the ex-military character roaring through the Everglades, slaying alligators with a shotgun.

Each of these personalities is more or less down on his or her luck, and opts to join the cast of

No Escape, a bizarre television show broadcast from an orbiting station to the populace back on the planet. Audience applause and laughter echo in the background as you fight your fellow characters from a third-person view. In the game's single-player mode, you battle through eighteen stages, each of which is about five minutes long. You need to come in first on each level before you can advance to the next. If you were to play through each of the stages flawlessly, it would probably take you about an hour and a half to finish the game.

The "flawlessly" part is somewhat problematical, however; since you can't save your game during a stage, you'll probably end up playing most of them several times. An hour and a half of game stretched over a significant

UPSIDE

Downplays violence, great sound and style, spherical battlefields

DOWNSIDE

No saving in single-player mode, game modes are humdrum



The game has great style; that big old 8 is warning me that there are that many seconds left in the match.

and the spheres are small enough to make the curve of the horizon quite pronounced. It's an interesting twist that also provides some nice visual effects, as glowing bolts of ammunition appear and disappear over the nearby horizon. Despite the fact that many of the levels do not permit you to explore the entire globe, these spherical battlefields do enhance the game.

Your camera view is determined not by your mouse movements, but rather by the direction you face. Your aiming reticle, on the other hand, is free to roam wherever you direct it to go with your mouse. Control is intuitive but a bit difficult to master, as the game's only aiming help is in the form of a crosshair that changes color when your shot is over a target. The weapons are fairly well balanced, with the more powerful weapons generally positioned in spots that are more difficult to reach. There are also a number of power-ups scattered throughout each level.

The game rewards those who aggressively attack the players who are in the lead. It's not a new idea, but it works, and it helps to encourage players to jump directly into the action. The higher your target is on the leader board, the more cash will pop out of him. In most game modes, hiding out or camping will get you precisely nowhere. The result is constant chaos, as players seek to knock out the leaders and strive to scoop up whatever coinage is spilling from their opponents.

The five available game modes range only from the mundane

(deathmatch, capture the flag) to the slightly unusual. In Countdown mode, explosives are strapped to each player, and the only way to extend the timers is to damage others. In Tag mode, the player who is "it" attempts to pass along the favor by hitting another player with a shot. Countdown plays similar to basic deathmatch—the only way to succeed is to be aggressive. Tag generally results in a lot of hiding.

The game oozes style, with high quality sound and nifty visuals that make it a simple matter to know at any time what weapon you've picked up, what your current ranking is, and which players are nearby. Fighting on a small globe has its charms, as does the attempt to skip the gibs and guts in favor of bloodless competition. The game is fun in a forgettable sort of way—there really isn't a whole lot to complain about, but there isn't a whole lot to keep you coming back for more, either. —Dave Perkins



In place of blood and guts, you try to knock cash out of your opponents, or collect it from on the ground.



The game does a nice job of organizing on-screen information.

THE GOODS

GENRE Non-violent Action

PUBLISHER FunCom

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32MB, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; internet, LAN, modem, serial

RATING

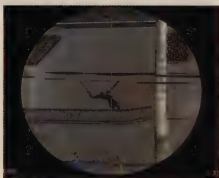


ly longer period of actual gameplay may not seem very appealing, but the replay value is actually fairly high. You can easily create any sort of game you want, with whatever number of enemies, on most any map. The game ships with AI bots, and they perform pretty well.

Each battle takes place on the surface of a spherical "planet,"



Cate looks smashing in her winter outfit.



Ooh, that's going to leave a mark.



Spot the mines with your swanky sunglasses.

No One Lives Forever

Check out the new "Mega Mix" demo of our Game of the Year

You're probably sick of hearing about it, but we really do like *No One Lives Forever*. The best first-person shooter in ages, if not one of the "all-timers," it hits a high note on every front: terrific varied gameplay, superb graphics and one of the most high-quality productions in recent game history. From the opening cut scene to the final twist at the end of the credits, it's full of everything gamers say they want: inventive settings, exotic locales, memorable characters, witty writing, fabulous voice acting... ah, the list goes on and on.

If you're not familiar with the game, you are Cate Archer, the beautiful but deadly "Operative" working for UNITY, a super secret organization fighting to free the world from the clutches of H.A.R.M. Set in a retro 1960s world of spies and day-glow colors that only exists in *Austin Powers* movies, it doesn't just defy the clichés of the genre, it embraces, extends and then stomps all over them.

Cate is equipped with an arsenal of weapons

and gadgets that would do James Bond proud, from your standard pistols and rifles to swanky sunglasses (that see land mines, which you can use in the demo) and blowtorch lighters (that's one powerful Zippo).

The game mixes pure action, adventure and stealth, and you'll get a bit of a taste of all of those elements in the new demo. While earlier versions were based on a pre-release version of the game, this "Mega Mix" demo is built from the version sold in stores, so it better represents

the final game. It includes the training level, the "Misfortune in Morocco" level from the original demo, plus portions of two others not included previously, "A Tenuous Lead" and "Alpine Intrigue." Each level is a subset of the overall mission, which usually encompasses 3-4 segments. The full game includes 15 missions with 60 levels in total, plus multiplayer.

So rather than rely on our opinion of this game's quality, check out this demo. Cate Archer rocks. 'Nuff said. ♦



That's one fat bastard.

THE GOODS

GENRE Groovy Action Adventure

PUBLISHER Fox Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 228MB



The game has an "arch" sense of humor.

Giants: Citizen Kabuto

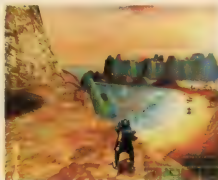
Bloody nipples? Check out what all of the fuss is about

Though we covered some of the weirdness surrounding the release of *Giants* last month (no nipples, green blood), here's your chance to check out what all the fuss is about. This strange hybrid game combines the look and feel of a classic shooter-style action game, a dash of strategy gaming, a bit of base building, diverse playable sides, and some console-style racing thrown in for good measure. It mixes outstanding 3D graphics and sound with an absurd but delightful British-style comedy science fiction script. It offers single and multi-player experiences that are fundamentally different. It also, unfortunately, adds to this mix a wide variety of bugs that render the game virtually unplayable for some, and that also make the lack of in-mission saves (the game's only real difficulty factor) an even more annoying omission than it would normally be.

We said in our review, "If *Giants* sounds too interesting to pass up—and it does have much to recommend it—make sure to conduct a little research on patch progress and affected system configurations before you head to the store." Well, here's your chance. This demo contains part of one story from the Mecc campaign, the wise-cracking heroes who provide the game most of its character. The full version of the game also gives you storylines as Delphi, the

topless (no more!) Sea Reaper and as the mighty Kabuto, who runs around stepping on things and eating 'em. It also has multiplayer for up to 10 players over a LAN or the Internet.

So check it out. You'll never look at blue people quite the same way. ■



Ooh, pretty landscapes.



Shoot 'em, shoot 'em!



CGCD-ROM INSTALLATION

Welcome to the Computer Games CD-ROM (CGCD). To install the demos, place the CD in your CD-ROM drive and the interface will automatically load. Maximizing the CGCD window will allow the interface to fill your screen.

To access the demos, click on the "Demos" icon. Click the game you want to install.

Additional materials—Trailers, the latest version of DirectX (which some games require)—can be found by clicking on the "Etc." icon.

If the CD fails to Autoplay, double click on "My Computer," double-click your CD-ROM drive (usually drive "D") and then double click the CGCD executable file (CGCD.EXE). If you're still having problems, please send a description of the problem along with your system configuration to cgcdtech@cdmag.com, or mail a letter with the same information to the address below. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original CD to:

Computer Games
63 Millet St.
Richmond, VT 05477
ATTN: CD replacement



The rippers popping out of the ground are one of the cooler effects.

THE GOODS

GENRE Formerly Topless Action

PUBLISHER Interplay

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 128MB

NBA Live 2001



THE GOODS

GENRE Basketball

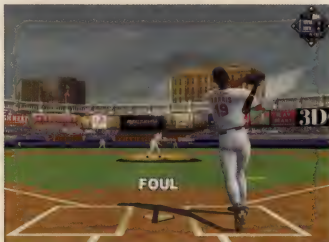
PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 73MB

Here's your own chance to take the rock to the hole. NBA Live is all about high-flying dunks, crossover dribbles, blocked shots, trash talking, superb graphics... it's typical EA Sports madness. The demo lets you play a three-minute quarter game between the NBA champs the Lakers and the vanquished Pacers. You can also play a game of one-on-one with Michael Jordan and Kevin Garnett.

High Heat 2002



THE GOODS

GENRE Baseball

PUBLISHER 3DO

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 104MB

Check out the demo of the world's best graphical baseball game. Play a three-inning game between the Yankees and Mets. Note: this is from the game's README file. "This demo of High Heat Major League Baseball 2002 is a pre-Beta version. Many of the game assets (animations, graphics, etc.) are in a pre-final state, and there may be several software defects." So there you go. You've been warned.

Ducati World Racing Challenge



THE GOODS

GENRE Racing

PUBLISHER Acclaim

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 63MB

Nothing quite says, "I have little regard for the status of my own life, so I will pilot an extremely light unprotected high-horsepower vehicle at ludicrously high speeds" like Ducati. The demo lets you race at one particular track (not based on a real one) and features a large selection of Ducati bikes to choose from.

F1 Championship Season 2000



THE GOODS

GENRE Racing

PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 64MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 45MB

Take a few laps at the Indianapolis raceway, converted to a Formula 1 track. You can select any of the 2000 drivers, from Michael Schumacher to David Coulthard to other guys you've never heard of, tune your car, crank up the damage to 300% (ooh, pieces everywhere!) and try to complete a few hot laps.

Dave Mirra Freestyle BMX



THE GOODS

GENRE Extreme BMX

PUBLISHER Acclaim

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 63MB

Bust some big air tricks in this excellent Tony Hawk-styled BMX starring the current king of the series, 10-Time World Champion Dave Mirra. The demo allows you to not only bust some big air tricks but also bust open your knees on one particular circuit. Check it out, you'll be surprised at how entertaining it is.

GorkaMorka



THE GOODS

GENRE Ork Racing

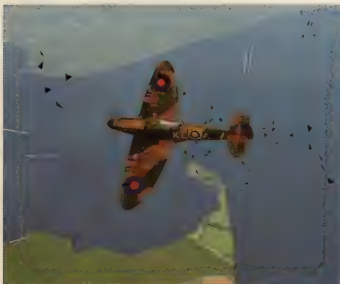
PUBLISHER Ripcord

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 86MB

File under strange. From the Games Workshop board game comes the first Ork combat racing simulation. Take a drive with your wonderful Ork Mob warriors in this Car Wars-style combat game. Eeeerrgggh. (It's always hard to remember how to spell the Ork war cry. That's definitely not it.)

Battle of Britain



THE GOODS

GENRE Simulation

PUBLISHER Empire

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 64MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 127MB

The creators of Flying Corps and MiG Alley deliver a simulation/strategy game that recreates the attacks on Britain by the German Luftwaffe. The full game has over 800 miles of airspace and five different flyable aircraft, but don't bother looking for France in the demo—it's ain't there.

Steel Panthers: World War II



THE GOODS

GENRE Wargame

PUBLISHER SP Camo Workshop

REQUIREMENTS DOS, Pentium 133, 32MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 127MB

Steel Panthers: World War II is a free tactical level wargame built from the original Steel Panthers.. It is hexagon based, and the game is an alternating turn based (I go you go or IGOUGO) design. It is an MSDOS program, but runs fine under most Windows installations (sound can often be a problem).

Free Agent Gaming

How to make your fortune in
online role-playing games
by Cindy Yans



When people ask, "So what do you do for a living?" and I tell them, they usually say, "Oh, so you get paid for playing games." After I finally convince them that this is not even slightly true (well, maybe the teeniest bit true, every fifth Saturday), I think about the people who actually do play games for a living. This is getting more and more possible as the years roll by, and the manifestations of this phenomenon are becoming more and more intricate.

WorldWinner.com (the new home of industry veteran and adventure-game guru Steve Meretzky) has the appearance of all of the Vegas blackjack-n-slots sites. That's how it

Currently you pay an "entry fee" to play against the scores of a set number of opponents in a tournament setting. If you have the high score, you win the purse. I was petrified to risk any of my five free dollars, so I preserved it and played only the no-stakes practice games. And I did well—very well, well enough that I bet if I entered with real cash, I'd be sure to win (with "bet" being the operative word). Yeah, that's right. So you get the point...it felt like I was observing a shill at three card monty.

But someone wins. At this writing, over two million games have gone down, and people have racked up thousands of dollars. That's one way to make a living playing games. eBay sales of farmed items from online role-playing

omy. *Entropia* will be free to download, and free to play. The currency with which you play, however, will be real—and the currency model will be based on US dollars. Charge that sword to your MasterCard, or send a certified check to the stockbroker to beef up your portfolio. You'll also be able to cash in any credits you earn via trade or sale of goods and services. Cash them in for the real thing, again in good old greenbacks.

Then how will Mindark make any profit? It will charge a transaction fee for all transfers of in-game credits. It'll be the virtual ATM, bookie, stockbroker, realtor, and pimp of online RPGs. It will also have in-game advertising that is not in the form of banner ads. Instead we'll see the equivalent of Coke machines and Reese's Pieces built into the visuals.

You'll be able to form companies, make initial public offerings and then buy and sell stock in the "Project Entropia" Stock Exchange. There will be no limit to the total amount you will be able to spend in game, although one source says that spending may be limited to \$1000 per day. There'll be casino gambling.

First of all, I don't imagine that there is any good way to regulate all of this. Secondly, all of the power and profit will be split amongst the folks who quit their jobs to play this puppy full time, making enjoyment by mere mortals rather iffy. But does it sound like a good way to make millions? The marketing managers think so.

I was lambasted not too long ago for saying that people who viewed online gaming solely for personal profit were somehow "not noble enough." Proponents of gaming for capital said, "Why not?" Well they may get their chance with *Project Entropia*. Meanwhile, when all is said and done, after a few years, I'll probably still have my free five dollars sitting in WorldWinner.com (if it lives), wishing that I had transferred it to PayPal where it would have accumulated interest. ■

"Then how will Mindark make any profit? It will charge a transaction fee for all transfers of in-game credits. It'll be the virtual ATM, bookie, stockbroker, realtor, and pimp of online RPGs."

itches itself, actually, as legalized gambling via "tournaments," which, since the games they include are skill-based rather than luck-based, do not fit the traditional gambling archetype. Then WorldWinner offered me five dollars to "try out" the site. Five free dollars? I was there. I registered and found that I could play all types of games like *Solitaire Rush*, *Free Cell*, *Tile City*, *Bash em All*, *Pencil Wars*, *Minesweeper*, *Crossword Challenge*, and a whole lot more. They're adding more and more games all the time, and soon there will be, gasp, online chat, and multiplayer.

games is another (although it's in waning mode at the moment, as publishers start to crack down on the practice), multiplayer action tournaments is another, and here's yet one more: *Project Entropia*.

In Sweden, a little company called Mindark is about to beta test its massively multiplayer RPG with a business model unlike anything else out there. On the planet of Calypso, you build a character, develop it within the social infrastructure, fight renegade robots, etc. It bears all of the trappings of any other RPG, however the key to this game will be its econ-



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Targeting the Loins

Just say no
by Tom Chick



Gathering of Developers is trying to sell games to my penis. I suppose this is a time honored advertising practice, but I feel obligated to tell them that my penis doesn't buy games. I buy games for the other head, the big one. I can honestly say I've never picked up a game because of a girl in an ad, much less one in a calendar.

I bring this up because I'm pretty sure Gathering of Developers is a calendar company looking to diversify by publishing computer games. At least that was my impression earlier today, when I took my Gathering of Developers promotional calendar out from under my mattress to find out what day of the week Good Friday falls on this year. That's when I noticed that Miss April's identity is hidden. In all the pictures, her face, but not much else, is cov-

erred with flight simmers is a bit of a stretch, though not nearly as much as implying that Miss June plays *Shadowbane*, an online role-playing game that hasn't even been made yet. But this reminded me that Gathering of Developers doesn't just make cheap trailer park tease porn. To be sure, I flipped through the rest of the calendar. Yep. There was a game at the bottom of every page.

Good time, real girls, great games
In a statement on their demo CD, Gathering's CEO, Mike Wilson, acknowledges their confusion as to whether they make sleazy calendars or computer games. "One of the things Gathering has become known for is our ability to have a good time," he admits. "We've found that it generally helps to surround ourselves (and you) with beautiful girls... real girls... to remind us

to ads for M-rated games. What better time for game companies to consider treating adult gamers with some semblance of dignity rather than pushing penis candy?

The eyes have it

Don't get me wrong. I don't object to attractive women being prominently featured in games. For instance, take a look at the cover of last month's issue. Go ahead, I'll wait here.

See? Now that's dignified. Cate Archer, the star of *No One Lives Forever*, has class, which comes through wonderfully when you actually play the game. But even if you don't know who she is, you can't help but notice that her two most prominent assets aren't her breasts. They're her eyes. Even in the game engine, the guys at Monolith gave her beautiful cat eyes, green and knowing, with generous lovely lashes. A heroine ain't just a polygonal model with a D-cup.

I also don't object to nudity as long as it serves some purpose. The glimpsed nipples on

In Red Alert 2, you would have suggestive cutscenes featuring shirtless marines cavorting in their barracks after a mission.

ered. In one picture, she's wearing a leather wrestling mask and small strips of duct tape. Until I saw this picture, I thought I knew everything duct tape was useful for. I can't help but think that her nipples are really going to smart when she takes that duct tape off.

At this point, I vaguely remembered that Gathering of Developers was in some line of work other than hiring strippers to help me remember what month it is. By squinting at two tiny pictures under Miss April's photo spread, I was almost able to make out airplanes. So I read the fine print at the bottom of the page. "Unlike Miss April's identity, it's no mystery why Terminal Reality's *Fly!* series is such a hit with flight simmers," it quipped in cramped six-point font.

Of course, calling *Fly!* (punctuation theirs) a

all that there is, indeed, more to life than great games." He doesn't go on to explain why he's confusing strippers with real girls, or why they remind him that there's more to life. But I'm glad to see they plan to go forward with the whole computer game thing. I can only suggest that given their approach, they might want to hold off until this whole "responsible marketing craze" blows over.

The "responsible marketing craze" is a new government-sponsored program. There's nothing like a few Senators saying things like "Federal", "Trade", and "Commission" to get the entertainment industry to do some soul-searching about how they're hawking their wares. Consider the Interactive Digital Software Association's recent and sudden musing about ways to protect minors from excessive exposure



Last month's issue. What a great pair of eyes.

Sin's bank hostages were a gratuitous and tasteless gesture. On the other hand, there's Interplay's last-minute decision to clothe *Giant's* topless Sea Reapers. Although Interplay was shipping a bawdy M-rated game, they treated their intended audience as if we were adolescent boys whose mothers were buying our games for us. The Sea Reapers were obviously modeled after classical sirens and mermaids. Since when are halter-tops part of Homer's *Odyssey* or ancient maritime legends? At least the Little Mermaid gets sea shells, but the best Interplay could do for their newly modest Sea Reapers was something you'd get at a Grateful Dead concert.

All it takes to make the right call and treat your audience with dignity is a modicum of taste and a sense for who's going to be playing your game. *Tropico* and *Startopia* are attempting a whimsical style appropriate for both sexes and a wide range of ages. So it's no surprise that *Tropico's* prostitutes have been converted into showgirls and *Startopia's* female aliens have lost their G-strings in favor of modest one-piece bathing suits. Compare this to games like *F.A.K.K. 2* and *Tomb Raider*, which unabashedly feature the absurdly distorted female proportions that have bled over from comic books into computer games. Consider the final scene of *Red Alert 2*, when your comely collagen-lipped commander shrugs off her coat to reveal an evening gown. Juvenile games for juvenile gamers.

It's not just the games, of course. The magazines and websites that cover games are just as often guilty of Gathering of Developers' calendar mentality. A fairly respectable site recently ran an article on how women's asses are modeled in computer games. Sure, it was tongue-in-cheek (...sorry), but the fact that such an article can be written, not the mention the number of hits it must have gotten, speaks volumes.

Requiem for a cheesecake factory

The magazines *Incite* and *PC Accelerator* are dead for many reasons, but I can only hope somewhere in those reasons is their lapse in taste, their assumption that the greatest common denominator among gamers is that we are all drawn to breasts more than anything else in this world. I'm not necessarily denying this, by the way, but the difference between me and certain magazines is that I occasionally try to rise above it. There's plenty of pornography in the world to remind me of the base nature of Man. I don't need the gaming industry to join the chorus.

Imagine if gaming were a predominantly homosexual industry.



She might still look like a prostitute, but technically she's a showgirl now.

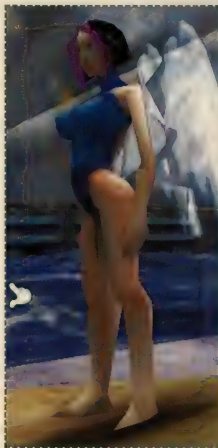


Behold Giant's M-rating in all its glory.

Assuming you're a heterosexual male, imagine what it would be like if you were constantly assaulted by ads featuring men with rippled abs and shaved chests, stripped down to their briefs and fondling a joystick with forced aplomb, proclaiming *Battlecruiser 3000* the last game you'll ever desire. John Romero would threaten to make you his "prag" and *EverQuest* ads would sport a barbarian in a strategically draped loincloth. The cover of your typical game magazine would feature a dark and willowy level designer with doe eyes and a Rupert Everett come-hither look—who also just happens to be dating the developer of a high profile first person shooter—posing for the photo shoot in a construction worker outfit or policeman's uniform. *Tomb Raider* would be about an archeologist in jeans so tight you would see a conspicuous bulge every time the camera swooped around his front side. His name would be Slab Buffmeat or Hard Dickman. In *Red Alert 2*, you would have suggestive cutscenes featuring shirtless marines cavorting in their barracks after a mission. Wouldn't you feel doozy buying these magazines and playing these games? Consider how your girlfriend, wife, or daughter regards the stuff you bring home.

Look at the best selling games from last year. *The Sims*. *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games claiming a hefty percentage of female players. Does this tell you something? There are women playing games. Let them in. Stop behaving like a bunch of adolescent miscreants or they're going to go away, just like the time you were in junior high and

they didn't want anything to do with your booger flinging contests or fart wars. This time, there's more at stake than just your dignity. The respectability of computer gaming, whether it's worthy of mainstream attention, whether it can reach a level of creative maturity, depends on whether it can transcend this stupid fascination with penis candy. You know what to do. Just say no. ■



Startopia's Siren dressed for a Teen rating.

It's Alive!

The game is finally a game
by Phil Steinmeyer



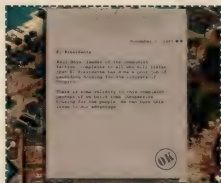
We've been working on our current game, *Tropico*, for 22 months now, but it's really only become a "game" in the last couple months. For the first 16 months or so, it was a collection of partially functional code bits, a montage of some finished graphics and a lot of placeholder art, with no sounds, video, balance or playability. The concept was neat, and we could make it dance when we had to show it at trade shows or to visiting journalists, but if you had actually tried to sit down and play the game, you would have been frustrated by the bugs and missing features, and if you worked your way through that, you would have been bored by the incomplete, unbalanced "game."

Not that *Tropico* is any different from other games out there. As much as hardcore gamers clamor to see and play alpha and pre-alpha

game included a reggae beat. But as the game developed, it shifted from a pan-Caribbean focus to a more narrow focus on the Latin part of the Caribbean, especially Cuba. Jamaican music with English voices didn't fit any more. We looked for Spanish reggae, but it either doesn't exist or we couldn't find it.

Briefly, we explored the possibility of trying to license Jimmy Buffett music for *Tropico*. While he, too, sings in English, we could have leaned more heavily on instrumentals, and his style is a rough fit for the game's setting. Plus, the idea of having Jimmy singing the *Tropico* theme song was just too good to pass up. (Our company name, PopTop, came to me when I was listening to his song "Margaritaville" one day.)

After digging through the liner notes on some Buffett CDs and following a few dead ends, I located and got through to Jimmy's



Tin shacks are not helpful to our popularity rating.

"Even the musicians with talent had no feel for Latin music—it'd be like contracting with Barbra Streisand to do a rap album."

versions of games, these early versions generally aren't much fun. Only in the last few months of development does the number of missing features and bugs manage to drop off enough to allow a moderately balanced, mostly complete game to actually be fun. Much like in *Frankenstein*, where the completed monster only comes to life with the application of a final, massive burst of electricity, a few of the last features to go into *Tropico* have really brought it to life, especially music and politics.

Bob Marley no habla español

The musical possibilities were one of the primary reasons we chose a Caribbean setting for *Tropico*. Our original mental images of the final

manager. Although Jimmy portrays himself as the ultimate laid back beach bum on his albums, his manager was anything but... how big is the game industry? How many copies did your last game sell? How much money are we talking about here? He didn't know much about games, but after being reassured that good games sold well and there could be a significant sum involved, he agreed to talk to Jimmy. I sent him a design document for *Tropico* and a copy of our last game, *Railroad Tycoon II*. Unfortunately, I had made the salesman's mistake of not catering my pitch for my target audience. The design doc I sent played up some of the nastier political elements of the game, including jailing your

opponents, oppressing your people, and other thuggish behavior. I hadn't modified the document especially for this purpose. The manager gave me a lecture on the 'Jimmy Buffett' image (laid back, beaches, bars and boats). No deal.

We don't need your steenkin' money

At least Jimmy Buffett's manager returned calls. Even though we were prepared to pay tens of thousands of dollars for the right music, most record label executives would never return calls. If you actually got hold of them, they acted as if they were doing you a great favor to even listen as we offered them large sums of money for old, obscure music. They generally had pricing schemes geared for 30 second commercials, rather than 60 minute game soundtracks.

At the other end of the spectrum were the many part-time musicians who either sent us unsolicited tapes or were listed in various web sites of available specialists. Unfortunately, the quality of their demos was usually only a notch or two above what 10 year-olds knock out on the Casio keyboards at Best Buy. Even the musicians with talent had no feel for Latin music—it'd be like contracting with Barbra Streisand to do a rap album.



Don't cry for me Tropicó... I may be retiring, but I've got \$5 million tucked away in Zurich.

Blowing the music budget

Finally, after six months of on and off searching, we found what we were looking for. Daniel Indart, born in South America, recording in Los Angeles, had scored two #1 hits in Latin America, had great demos, and was very professional. Unfortunately, his price was double what our publisher, Take 2, was used to paying for game music. With only a few months to go until game completion, and no other viable alternatives, Take 2 reluctantly agreed to the price. After vouching that Daniel could do the job, we were doubly on the hook—if he failed or the music turned out lousy, Take 2 would be mad at us about the price, and we'd be out of time to find alternate music.

We just got our first full batch of 30 minutes of music last week (with another 30 minutes on the way). Much to our relief, and to Take 2's satisfaction, the music is excellent. The game code was already set up to play the music, so it was dropped into *Tropicó* that day. The music dramatically improves the Latin feel of the game, more so than I had anticipated. And it also jelled nicely with the recently added political features.

Be nice to the guys with guns

For most of the development cycle, the political elements of *Tropicó* were nebulous, at best. We went through multiple different designs on how the citizens of your island would react to you, what would make them angry, what they would do when angry, and what you could do to please them. None of them ever seemed quite right on paper, and with so many other tasks to do, politics sort of got left by the wayside. Finally, a couple months ago, I decided to just start putting political elements in, even if they weren't perfectly conceived. After the first burst of coding, we were able to playtest and refine these elements, and a plan started to fall into place.

As dictator, you must survive threats to your power from four sources—internal uprising, guerrilla warfare from rebels in the hills, military coup-de-tat, and foreign invasion, by the U.S. or Russia. All of these threats, in turn, are primarily a function of how different factions of your population feel about you. The six factions: capitalists, communists, militarists, religious, environmentalists, and intellectuals, react to different stimuli, and respond in different ways.

The militarists are normally a smaller faction, but are particularly important—don't annoy the guys with guns or you'll be facing a coup. The militarists look for a strong army, with high pay, and prefer a dictator with a personal military background.

The capitalists are also small, but your relationship with the U.S. is largely determined by how you treat this group. The capitalists may not have many guns, but the United States certainly does, and is not at all shy about deposing Caribbean dictators it dislikes. The capitalists want luxuries for the elite members of Tropicó society, plus an economy that emphasizes high-profit activities like industry and tourism over basic farming and logging.

Everybody hates me

Other factions have their own goals and responses. It's quite a trick to keep both the capitalists and the communists happy at the same time. In the first wave of



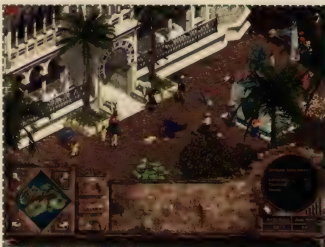
A background as a generalissimo can be very nice if you ever have to declare martial law.

playtesting with the faction system implemented, I was able to make every single faction except the militarists hate me. Needless to say, my reign was rather short. I had to go into the source code and artificially inflate every faction's attitude towards El Presidente. But there's also a game setting that controls overall political difficulty. At its hardest, you'll strive to keep your popularity rating even in the double digits. The good news is you can turn the difficulty all the way to the other, easy, end, at which point even Fidel Castro would be the toast of the capitalist faction.

We also brought the factions to life by giving each faction a leader, chosen by the faction itself. Each faction leader is a real person from among your people, and is fully susceptible to carrots (i.e. bribes, an especially good house), and sticks (i.e. a lengthy stay in the Tropicó federal prison). Late in the game, with a population of 500 or so citizens, bribing these six leaders is a cheap way to have a positive influence on the other 494 citizens.

It's alive! It's alive!

The addition of music and politics in the last few weeks has really added character to the game. It just feels right to have a soulful Spanish ballad playing as the local communist leader presents another demand (or threat?) for you to build decent housing for the peasants. *Tropicó* has come to life and Latin music and politics are coursing through its veins. ■



Uprisings are a bit messy. It's much cleaner to just keep your people happy.

Review Praise and Protest

Dogged bugs

William Abner's review of *Sea Dogs* [CGM 124] could not be more accurate. I waited with bated breath for this *Pirates!* wannabe and was disappointed with this bug-infested game.

Ok enough whining.

Mr. Abner deserve major kudos for his honest review, and articles like this are the reason I subscribe to your magazine.

Robert Luongo

Dogging Tiger

I have just read your "review" of *Tiger Woods 2001* and I have to say I am shocked to see such disastrously written review. The score on this review is by far the lowest of any I have witnessed, and I have read them all. Most reviews have this game in the 70-80% range, which is fair. The game is not perfect and does have a few flaws, but to characterize the game the way Brett Todd did is just flat out misinformation. With this travesty of a review, I have lost all faith in his objectivity and value as a reviewer.

Tim Scott

Mod squad

I think you should put more reviews of game mods and patches in your magazines.

Ryan

We agree. Look for our new "Afterlife" section, with Mods, tips, patches, map making tutorials... basically anything you can do post-release with a game, starting with the June issue. —ed

Grandma speaks

I would like to address the issue brought up by "Name withheld to protect the children." [I "Rebound" CGM 124]. I am a 57 year old grandmother, and retired newspaper editor. I read your fine magazine every month and also have two grandchildren who visit me almost daily, one age 12 and one age eight. Neither looks through your magazine for the same reason

they don't watch certain programs on TV; both their parents and I take an interest in what they are reading and watching.

In my opinion, if "protect the children" doesn't want his or her children reading your magazine then he or she shouldn't leave it where it is accessible. It is the responsibility of the parents, and not the magazine editors or game developers to keep objectionable material away from children. If I turn my computer into a baby-sitter and allow my grandchildren to play violent games whose fault is it? If I hand my eight year old grandson a magazine filled with pictures of violence, who's responsible? The magazine editor, the game developer, or me?

Think about it.

Arathiaes

Mad as hell

I'm tired of narrow minded, short sighted people writing in to complain about the content and pictures included in your magazine. When did we as a society stop taking responsibility for ourselves and our children? Why is it someone else's duty to make sure our children don't look at or read things we find unsuitable? The television has an off button, as does the radio. Don't buy the magazine if you find its content offensive, or better yet buy the magazine to read for yourself and simply tell your children, "no." Whatever your solution, don't cut off my freedom to choose what I watch, read or hear. I'm entitled to find amusing what you find horrible.

I tell ya ed, I never thought until recently that choice and responsibility were such hard concepts to grasp.

Debra S. Moon

Well, we can't really argue with you on any of your points. Sorry. —ed

Urine the money

The review of *Timeline* [CGM 124] has to be the funniest review, let

alone anything I've read in a good long time. Erik Wolpaw deserves a raise for the article and for having been forced to play the damn thing. I quote from this master piece of put down "In general, progressing through the game is a slightly more challenging version of clicking the install program's "Next" button." I nearly pee'd my pants laughing at this point, and it only got better. I did change my pants by the end of the review.

Shawn

Awfulness

I like *Insane* fuels *Black Dragon* game better than *The Untouchables* [CGM 123]. They also did a cheesy game called *Tango of Blood* in where you sidescroll beat 'em up your way through areas to rescue a dying general's last request to get his daughter out of the Pimping ring. Funny stuff. Check it out: www.insanefuel.com

Kris

Wow, those are truly awful games, and well worth the down-load. —ed

Incoherent response response

Writing as a doctor I am responding to Gridge's letter ["Incoherent Response," CGM 124].

Rumpamonkus is a serious disease and he/she should not be ashamed. It was a plague in the 1800s and is rare today, but is painful for the patient. This is not a joke. I suggest Grige see a support group for this matter.

Payton Brown

Owned!

I bet you \$200 this won't get printed in your magazine.

basset man

Aw c'mon, how shameless can you get? You can do better than that. —ed



Spelling Siege

I wanted to personally thank Cindy Yans for the terrific write-up she did on *Dungeon Siege* in issue 124. It's always nice to have the things I've worked on so nicely covered in your terrific magazine.

I've only got one niggling little correction,

and that's in the spelling department. My name is spelled Neal Halford, not Neil Halford. I know it's not a big deal, and no planets zip out of their orbits over it, but it makes it more difficult for people to find my info on the web if they don't have all the right letters in all the right places.

Take care, and thanks again for your excellent work!

Neal Halford

Bloody Nipples redux

The article about the censorship of *Giant: Citizen Kabuto* ["Bloody Nipples," *CGM* 124] confused me. If the designers really thought that the censorship "sucked", then why didn't they just produce two versions of the game? One for the Wal-Mart-esque stores, and the other stores that aren't so worried about an "M" rating.

From what I understand, it really wouldn't be any different than what record labels do with certain CDs with questionable lyrics. Otherwise, why don't companies that want the program to be uncensored, just create patches to do so?

Maybe I see things too black and white, but if companies really have a love for their game, then I don't believe that they would cop out just because Wal-Mart wants them to.

Jeremy R. Mahon

It's not a bad idea to consider producing two versions, but there's likely a cost issue of producing two separate boxes and CDs. If any game publishers are reading out there, perhaps you could write in and explain why you couldn't produce separate M and Teen edition. —red

Get Evil

Okay, you sold me, I want the computer game known as *Evil Islands* [*CGM* 124]. This game should do well, because everyone loves a mystery. I can see myself on some strange island, seeing ruins around me, wondering how I got on this island and bits and glimpses of how I got there start filtering through my mind. The description of the graphics sounds great and it would be interesting to start an adventure by seeking out information from the populace of this island. With 100 hours of game play, that's not shabby at all.

Thank goodness it's not a computer game that is based on the reality TV show *Temptation*

Island. Yuck!

Sharon Diane Roberts

Don't give Fox any ideas. —ed

In-game ads

In response to the response to William Woods letter in the March issue ["Advertising Games"], why not? What would be wrong with going to the local inn with a "Marriott" sign? Why not buy a healing potion labeled "Coke"? I can see thousands of possible combinations that would be effective and yet not detract from the game.

Too much time, effort and money is being spent to stop a few people from getting the games for free. Give it to them free and spend the effort on making better games. We would all benefit.

Tonya Samples

It depends on context. If a game was set in the modern world, perhaps those types of product placements wouldn't be obtrusive. However, I still have a hard time getting excited about welcoming more advertising into our lives. —ed

Icky ads

Per Mr. Woods suggestion of advertising in games, perhaps he should examine Nintendo 64 games. While sitting for a friend's eight-year old, he was playing some game and when he went fishing, the NPC happily remarked that he would get a better experience from his game if he purchased a N64 rumble pack for his controller!

Regrettably, I seem to be the only adult aware that N64 games try to convince children to purchase N64 hardware... at least his parents didn't know.

Donald Campbell

DirectX 8

In your article ["Raising the Bar," *CGM* 124] you stated no card would be released before 2001 with DirectX 8 features. Have you forgotten about the ATI Radeon, which is

the first DX8 video card out?

Radeon supports both Vertex and Pixel shaders that you mentioned, as well as 4-matrix vertex skinning and keyframe interpolation, which are all features of DX8. ATI's included Pixel Tapestry Architecture is also based on DX8 as well as many other Radeon features. NVIDIA's NV20 will be the second videocard on the market not the first, like so many people like to believe.

I find it upsetting that the Radeon is never mentioned in many articles such as this one, especially when the Radeon is mainly a DX8 based video card, and does support pixel and vertex shaders.

Neil Bolt

Jason Cross responds: Actually, the Radeon is not a fully DirectX 8 compliant video card. It's DirectX 8 compatible, and it does support several features you'll be able to do in DirectX 8, but it does not fully implement the 1.0 specification of pixel or vertex shaders. If a game were to check for pixel or vertex shaders, the Radeon would have to report that it didn't support them, even if the program was going to use them for features that the Radeon supports.

Quake III focus

I loved your article on how reviews tend to focus too much on *Quake III* ["*Quake III* Isn't That Important" *CGM* 124], even though most games don't even use OpenGL as the API of choice. I am a "fansite reviewer" with a difference. Tending to eschew benchmarks because of the limited choices available I prefer to describe playing various games over running a endless series of demo loops.

Don't get me wrong, that doesn't mean I can't or don't use benchmarks when I feel it's warranted. But too many in this industry of online reviewers (in particular) focus solely on *Quake III*. To me there's room to do far more with a hardware review than sit there by a superfast Athlon/P4

and run Timedemo1. In fact some reviewers don't bother to give the exact settings, background, or system spec, which makes the benchmarks useless.

Benjamin Sun
Assistant Editor PCRAVE,
Staff Writer
TechExtreme.com

The industry agrees

We need more benchmarks. I've been lobbying developers to do so—Electronic Arts, the engine team for EA Sports, LithTech, just to mention a few. The issue is usually time and support, unfortunately. *Serious Sam* looks to have some promise as another OpenGL benchmark.

As you know KYRO has advantage when scene complexity gets high, I'm always on the lookout for new D3D benchmarks in games to further demonstrate this.

Joe Kreiner
Developer Relations Manager
STMicro — KYRO

Myth 3 is 1337 (we think)

OMG heart murmur WOOT! WOOT! Myth 3!!!!

Hur-freakin-ray!!!!!!
I'm getting teary eyed!!!!!!
My fully modeled tow is gonna kick some fully modeled dwarf ass!!!!

Now something to wait for, a goal, MYTH 3.
Panhandling is for me!!!!!! and teachers I might add. is panhandling for writers and editor doodz like joo?

(please don't mind the 1337 sp3ak4k im trying to cut down)

Jim Scanlan

d00dZ! u R00ll! —3d

Haiku for you

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CH Products (Hardware)

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[illegible]

Talonsoft (War



ing incredible sound in
movies composition



realism of over 100 forces. A 16-bit 25MHz on-board processor



the desktop has arrived

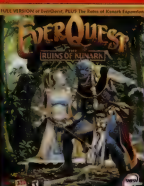


QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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PC CD

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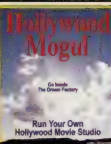
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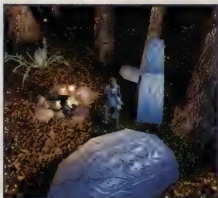
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Freedom Force Takes on the Superhero Curse—We'll actually run the Freedom Force feature we teased last month (it's called "Coming Soon" and not "Next Issue" for a reason). We sent it back for some new super powers and we came



back with a superb article on both the game and the history of its developer, Irrational Games.

Hardware Galore—Right as we were finishing this issue DELL sent us a 1GHz laptop with a GEFORCE 2 GO accelerator. We're impressed. Also, we'll have a flood of new GEFORCE 3 videocards to test.

True Confessions of the Game Testers—So you want to play games for a living? This article goes inside the QA departments of the game companies—you won't believe what goes on behind those hallowed doors. No respect, terrible hours, low wages... but they do play games for a living.



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